WRESTLERS WITH GOD

By

CLARENCE E. MACARTNEY

A study of the great prayers of the Old Testament and of the men who uttered them. As Durant has told the story of Philosophy through the lives of philosophers, so the author has told the story of prayer through men who prayed. The result is a book infinitely more powerful than any academic discussion of prayer could ever be.

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WRESTLERS WITH GOD

To the great men who pass before us in this book prayer was no subjective experience, no rote by which they tried to lift themselves by their own bootstraps. To them the "subliminal self" was not the goal of prayer. Abraham, Jacob, Joshua, Elisha and Jeremiah wrestled with God. In the midst of life they were in prayer.

What would be finer than to behold these stalwart characters of the Old Testament at prayer? With rare devotion and insight Clarence E. Macartney has given us a gallery of portraits passing from Abraham to Manasseh. He has taken men in agony and exultation to show what the Father is like. His book will appeal profoundly to all who feel that we have grown too much concerned with theories about prayer today and not enough concerned about prayer itself.

Roy R. Baeue

WRESTLERS WITH GOD

Clarence Edward Macartney
has also written:

PARABLES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
PUTTING ON IMMORTALITY
PAUL THE MAN
LINCOLN AND HIS GENERALS
HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS OF THE CIVIL WAR

WRESTLERS WITH GOD

PRAYERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

BY

CLARENCE EDWARD MACARTNEY

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
PITTSBURGH, PA.

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To
MY FRIENDS
OF THE
WEDNESDAY EVENING CONGREGATION AT
THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
OF PITTSBURGH

FOREWORD

Perhaps some who glance at the Table of Contents will wonder why, in a study of the Old Testament Prayers, such prayers as Solomon's, offered at the dedication of the temple, or Daniel's great penitential prayer for Israel, or David's prayer of thanksgiving when God had told him that his son would build the temple and that his throne would be established forever, are omitted from the list. The reason is that I have endeavored to select brief petitions which were wrung from the lips of sorrow and pain, or came from some overflowing well of deep emotion. Prayers like those of Solomon and Daniel, and others in the Old Testament which might be mentioned, are noble intercessions, highwater marks in the literature of prayer. But they are somewhat remote from the emotions of immediate distress and desire. The prayers which I have chosen come, I am convinced, much closer to the hearts of men.

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I

THE PRAYER OF ABRAHAM

I

THE PRAYER OF ABRAHAM

"And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?

"Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?

"That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"—GENESIS 18:23–25

Abraham is the loftiest character of the Bible, but for that very reason he is the loneliest, even as the loftiest mountains are the most isolated and solitary.

In his great oration delivered at the unveiling of the Lincoln Memorial at Hodgenville, Kentucky, President Wilson said of Abraham Lincoln:—"I have read many biographies of Lincoln; I have sought out with the greatest interest the many intimate stories that are told of him, the narratives of nearby friends, the sketches at close quarters, in which those who had the privilege of being associated with him have tried to depict for us the

very man himself 'in his habit as he lived'; but I have nowhere found a real intimate of Lincoln's. That brooding spirit had no real familiars. I get the impression that it never spoke out in complete self-revelation, and that it could not reveal itself completely to anyone. It was a very lonely spirit that looked out from underneath those shaggy brows and comprehended men without fully communing with them, as if, in spite of all its genial efforts at comradeship, it dwelt apart, saw its visions of duty where no man looked on."

We hear the voice that calls to Abraham out of Ur of Chaldees and we follow him as he goes out not knowing whither he went. We wait with him through the long years for the fulfillment of the promise. We climb with him the steep slopes of Moriah and look with awe on his readiness to sacrifice the child of the promise. We bow with him at his altars of prayer. We follow him to battle against Chedorlaomer, and we hear his earnest intercession for the cities of the Plain; and we stand with Isaac and Ishmael as they bury their father in the cave of Machpelah. But at the end of the journey from Ur of Chaldees to far distant Machpelah, how little do we understand him! Isaac we understand, Jacob we know, Joseph we have shed our

tears over; Saul, David, Samuel—all these we feel we have an affinity with. But Abraham's "brooding spirit had no familiars." There he is, a great mountain rising over the dull plains of history, wrapped in awe and mystery.

But he whose spirit had no familiars was the Friend of God. That much we would know of him, even if Isaiah and James had not handed down to us that unique description. Wherever Abraham went, he built an altar unto God. "And there he builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord." That verse describes his life as well as any other. He blazed his trail in Canaan by the altars which he built. We can trace his wanderings by the altars which he left behind him. Some men are traced by their follies; some by the enmities they leave behind them; some by their cruelties; some by the thorns which they have sown in the night of sin or hate. But Abraham is traced by his altars. Towards God his life was easy, natural, familiar. On this side his life is a model for all the ages of the faith after him. Only once, when the first promise of an heir was given, and a horror of great darkness fell upon him, is there anything in Abraham's relationship with God which suggests fright or terror. For

the most part, his meetings with God were on the clear, level ground of friendly intercourse.

If we omit the cry of Cain, this is the first prayer on record in the Bible. The Father of the Faithful is the first to teach us how to pray. His prayer was that which came from a friend of God. The friends of God are not the only ones who may pray. His bitterest enemy may call upon His Name; the soul which has lived without a thought of God, suddenly overwhelmed in the floods of life, out of the depths may call upon God to help him and deliver him. But as the conversation of strangers must necessarily be different from the conversation of friends, so there is a kind of prayer that comes only from the lips of the friend of God. And who is the friend of God? Is God like great personages of earth who will admit to their friendship only a few elected persons? No; the friend of God, so far as we can judge, is the man who does the will of God. "Ye are my friends," said Jesus, "if ye do whatsoever I command you." Abraham did what God told him to do. When God called he answered, took the great venture of faith, and went out not knowing whither he went.

The youthful Ian MacLaren, visiting his uncle in the Highlands, looked with wistful admiration

on a white haired elder in the kirk who passed the sacred cup at Communion. When he saw him the next day breaking stone on the road, he was amazed and asked his uncle how it was that the bearer of high office yesterday, today should be laboring on the highway. His uncle told him that James was an elder in the kirk because he knew more about God than any other man in the village. He was a friend of God. Abraham was an old man. Indeed, although the youngest may be His friend, that title, the "Friend of God" we like to bestow only upon those who in God's service have weathered the storms and temptations of many years. I am glad that the first prayer in the Bible is of this nature. I rejoice that it was an aged servant of God whose prayer, still a fragrant incense, speaks to us across these dim centuries. The line of Abraham is not extinct. They are the glory of all our churches. Voice of scoffing, mocking, worldling, barking critics, honest or dishonest doubter, be still, while the aged friend of God prays. Remove thy shoes from off thy feet, for the ground upon which thou standest is holy ground. God is there speaking with His Friend and His Friend with Him. Yes, here is an argument and witness for Christianity which is beyond

the "contagion of this world's slow stain." Even the angels, I can imagine, interrupt their high melody to catch the harmony and breathe the incense that goes up from the heart of some aged saint, who has got beyond the weak and beggarly elements, and like Bunyan's immortal traveler, has reached the high country, out of reach of Giant Despair and Doubting Castle, in sight now of the city to which he is going, meeting sometimes the inhabitants thereof, for in this land the shining ones commonly walked, for it was "on the borders of heaven."

Although spoken by the Friend of God, I ask you to think of the humility and reverence of this prayer. "Behold now I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes." There is an unmistakable tendency today to speak slightingly of those old hymns and prayers which described man as dust and ashes. A recent lecturer on free thought declared that he embarked on his new religion because, brought up in the Episcopal Church, he wearied of describing himself as a "miserable sinner." It is only natural that such people should cease to pray. Only the humble can feel any need for God, and His ever present aid is given only to the humble and

contrite in spirit. Out of humility comes reverence.

When the other men were gone and the Third Person remained, "Abraham drew near unto God." That phrase lingers in a thousand prayer books and is repeated by good men and women in public prayer the world over. His prayer is earnest, definite, importunate, yet as we read it, we see in Abraham an everlasting example of reverence. Personally, I have no sympathy with those prayers which are addressed to men rather than to God, and call upon the Almighty and Invisible God in terms of familiarity which do not, as they imagine, indicate that they know God well, but show on the contrary how little they conceive of His majesty and holiness. "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few."

Even the very posture in prayer is important. The most reverent attitude is, I think, the worshiper standing with bowed head, as one sees in public worship in Scotland and as I witnessed it among the Waldensians in Italy one summer. But whether kneeling or standing, in public or in private, let the body speak the reverence of the

soul. David Livingstone, in his diary, relates how careful he was in the wilds of Africa, removed from all that he had known and seen, to observe the reverent attitude in prayer. Even till death he was faithful in this, for he died upon his knees. A weak, fever-stricken, dying man might have been excused from the physical effort of prostration, but this man left his cot and died upon his knees. Professor Blakie in his classic biography of Livingstone thus describes the scene:—"They laid him on a rough bed in the hut where he spent the night. Next day he lay undisturbed. He asked a few wandering questions about the country—especially about the Luapula. His people knew that the end could not be far off. Nothing occurred during the early part of the night, but at four in the morning, the boy who lay at his door, called in alarm for Susi, fearing that their master was dead. By the candle still burning they saw him, not in bed, but kneeling at the bedside, with his head buried in his hands upon the pillow. The sad, yet not unexpected truth, soon became evident. He had passed away on the furthest of all his journeys, and without a single attendant, but he had died in the act of prayer; prayer offered in that reverential attitude about which he was always so particular; com-

mending his own spirit with all his dear ones, as was his wont, into the hands of his Saviour, and commending Africa, his own dear Africa, with all her woes and sins and wrongs, to the Avenger of the oppressed and the Redeemer of the lost."

This first prayer of the Bible was a prayer for others, a prayer of intercession. Here prayer reaches its noblest eloquence. The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and when the Lord had announced to Abraham His purpose of destroying the wicked cities of the plain, Abraham did not doubt the justice of God, nor the wickedness of these people, but immediately he begins to intercede for them. His nephew Lot, it is true, lived there, and the thought of Lot may have entered into this earnest supplication of Abraham. But Lot, even from the human standpoint, did not deserve the prayers of his godly uncle. He was disrespectful and ungrateful and self-willed. Nevertheless Abraham prayed for him. The Friend of God must have abhorred the wickedness of the cities of the Plain, but when he hears of their impending doom, the fountains of pity are opened in his heart, and he asks God to spare them if but ten righteous men are to be found in them.

(Mysterious channels of power are opened by earnest intercession.) More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of. In the appendix to Dick's "Philosophy of the Future State," the book that converted David Livingstone, we have the story of a prayer made for the conversion of Lord Byron by a Mrs. Shepherd of Somersetshire. The prayer was found among her papers after her death and sent to Byron. It is as follows: "O my God, I take encouragement from the assurance of thy word, to pray to Thee in behalf of one for whom I have lately been much interested. May the person to whom I allude (and who is now, we fear, as much distinguished for his neglect of Thee, as for the transcendent talents Thou hast bestowed on him) be awakened to a sense of his own danger, and led to seek that peace of mind in a proper sense of religion, which he has found this world's enjoyments unable to procure. Do Thou grant that his future example may be productive of far more extensive benefit, than his past conduct and writings have been of evil, and may the Sun of Righteousness, which, we trust, will, at some future period, arise upon him, be bright in proportion to the darkness of those clouds which guilt has raised, and soothing in proportion to the keenness of that

agony which the punishment of his vices has inflicted on him!"

To this prayer, Lord Byron responded in one of his best moods: "Sir, I have received your letter. I need not say that the extract which it contains has affected me, because it would imply a want of all feeling to have read it with indifference. . . . Your brief and simple picture of the excellent person, whom I trust you will again meet, cannot be contemplated without the admiration due to her virtues and her pure and unpretending piety. I do not know that I ever met with anything so unostentatiously beautiful. Indisputably, the firm believers in the Gospel have a great advantage over all others—for this simple reason, that if true, they will have their reward hereafter; and if there be no hereafter, they can but be with the infidel in his eternal sleep. . . . I can assure you that not all the fame which ever cheated humanity into higher notions of its own importance, would ever weigh in my mind against the pure and pious interest which a virtuous being may be pleased to take in my behalf. In this point of view, I would not exchange the prayer of the deceased in my behalf for the united glory of Homer, Caesar and Napoleon."

This prayer of Abraham raised a great problem of religious faith. When he heard the tidings that God would destroy these cities, Abraham was shocked; his faith staggered. He was confronted by God, not now the source of promise and blessing, but God the Avenger, God the Judge. Involuntarily comes the expostulation and the question, "That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from Thee. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" We may be glad that the Friend of God had this old difficulty about the judgments of God and that he raised this great question so early in the history of mankind.

An easy way to dispose of the problem is to dispose of all judgments. But that is to dispose of God, for justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne. He must do right and He must judge the wicked. Mere sentiment cannot stand in this discussion unless due regard be paid to the highest of all sentiment, the sentiment of justice and judgment.

The thesis laid down by Abraham must stand. The Judge of all the earth will do right. The thing done is not right because He does it, but

because He is God, He will do nothing but the right, for that alone would conform with the perfection of His being. No excuse for irreligion can be made on the score of injustice. God will do right, whatever man teaches or says. With that grand fundamental attribute of the Deity firmly fixed in our minds, we must confront the questions that rise when, with the proclamation of life there goes a proclamation of death, as when the risen Christ commands His disciples to preach the Gospel to every creature, saying that he that believeth shall be saved and he that believeth not shall be condemned. The lifeboat putting out from the shore means that there is a wreck and that a ship is sinking, and that lives may be lost. The offer of salvation means that humanity has suffered shipwreck and men may perish.

What will God do with the heathen, you ask? They have never heard of the name of Jesus. Will They all be condemned? God will do with the heathen what He will do with you and with me: what is right. If men without the tidings of Christ will be judged by their own consciences, is it not better to leave them without the Gospel, since the majority only reject it, and thus come under condemnation? No; if any heathen obeys

the light of conscience, he will be saved, and yet saved through Christ, saved on the ground of what Christ has done for him. But think how often you and I, with all the light of Christian centuries playing about us, sin against the light of conscience. What likelihood is there, then, that the heathen will follow the light of his conscience? Christ did not tell us to preach the Gospel to every creature for the sake of condemning them, but that they might repent and live. "Follow thou me, keep my commandments"—that is our whole duty as Christians. The day of judgment—none of us can take charge of that. The Judge of all the earth will do right.

> "God's justice is a bed
> Where we our anxious hearts may lay,
> And, weary with ourselves, may sleep
> Our weariness away."

The prayer of Abraham was an example in perseverance. At his first approach to God, Abraham prayed that God would spare Sodom and Gomorrah if he found fifty righteous men therein. When the Lord said that He would spare the city if such a number could be mustered, Abraham proceeded further and asked that the city be spared if forty-five could be found. To this also

the Lord assented. Then Abraham asked Him to spare it for the sake of thirty, then of twenty, and, finally, of ten. Unfortunately, even that small number of righteous men could not be found in the cities, and doom and judgment fell upon them.

We are not to look upon this reduction from fifty to ten just persons, for whose sake the city might be spared, as a sort of bargaining on the part of Abraham with God. Rather, is it an example of perseverance in prayer, and how one prayer answered gives us confidence to come to God again. When the Lord promised to spare the city if fifty righteous men could be found in it, Abraham was prompted to reduce the number, first, to forty-five, then to thirty, then to twenty, and finally to ten. Our Lord told two parables teaching men that they ought always to pray, and not to faint. One, the parable of the friend at midnight, for whose entertainment the man whom he had come to visit knocked importunately upon his neighbor's door, until the reluctant slumberer arose and gave unto him. The other, the story of the unjust judge and the importunate widow. The unjust judge feared neither man nor God; but lest the widow should weary him by her continual coming,

he avenged her of her adversary. In those parables our Lord must not be misunderstood as likening God our Father to a selfish neighbor, who gives to His friend only to be rid of him, or to an unjust judge, who administers justice only to save himself from annoyance at the hands of his petitioner. What He was emphasizing was the fact that we may not always receive at first that for which we pray, and that we ought to persevere therein, waiting earnestly upon God, wrestling with Him as Jacob did at midnight by the fords of the Jabbok, or as Abraham did when in the desert twilight he pleaded for Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Bible echoes from beginning to end with the accents of prayer, and it is worth remembering that the first recorded prayer of the Old Testament is this prayer of intercession, when Abraham prayed for the cities of the plain. Men come near to God when they pray for others. A well known minister of the last generation said that his mother and two other mothers in the neighborhood of his boyhood home made a pact that they would meet and pray together for the salvation of their children on one day of every week. One by one, all of those children came into the Kingdom of God, until this afterwards distinguished minister made

his confession of faith and completed the number. What sacred objectives for intercession do fathers and mothers have set before them!

Doctor Charles Parkhurst, the distinguished preacher and reformer of New York, in an address in which he dealt with his early religious life, related how he had often heard his father pray in the Church, at the family altar, and at the family table. But it was only when he heard him praying aloud on his knees in the barn, that he knew the reality of prayer and the deep reality of the religious life.

For there is no prayer which so strikes the deep chords of a true relationship with God as the prayer of intercession. Our prayers will be more earnest and our prayer seasons more fruitful and more joyous, if we shall consecrate and center upon certain causes and upon certain persons. We all can think of persons for whom we ought to pray and for whom Christ died. Devout Catholics have a custom of saying one to another, when they part, "Pray for me." Whatever formality there may be in that request, it is a truly beautiful and appropriate thing that one believer in God should ask the prayers and the intercessions of another friend of God. She has long since gone

to her reward; but my mind now runs back to the old home on the banks of the river, and I can see the room which was her trysting place with God, and where at a certain hour of the forenoon, she was wont to kneel in intercession for the salvation of her children. Truly our mother's works do follow her, now that she herself rests from her labors; and not the least potent and the least blessed among those works is the daily influence of her prayers on our behalf. No rude clamor of the world can altogether dim the sweet reverberation of her prayers in the minds of her children; and if the base solicitations of the world should ever be heeded and obeyed by her children, it will be in spite of, and not because of, a mother's earnest prayers.

II

THE PRAYER OF LOT

II

THE PRAYER OF LOT

"Oh, let me escape thither. Is it not a little one? And my soul shall live."—GENESIS 19:20

When Abraham had finished his noble intercession in behalf of the wicked cities of the plain, he got from the Lord a promise that if he found ten righteous men there, He would not destroy the city. The Lord went His way and Abraham returned to his place. Meanwhile, the two angels, ministers of the Divine justice, drew nigh to the gates of Sodom. Lot was not less careful to entertain strangers than Abraham, and greeted the two men with kindness and courtesy. They had not been long in Lot's house when they had an exhibition of the frightful wickedness of the inhabitants, such as left them in no doubt as to the necessity of immediate and terrible judgment. Not even ten righteous men were to be found. But God could do better than Abraham thought. Abraham thought that God would condemn the city as a whole, or save it as a whole. But God

does not deal with the righteous as if they were the wicked. Lot, who was at least relatively righteous, is warned of the coming judgment and permitted in turn to warn his family connections. This he does with vigor and earnestness. "Up, get you out of this place, for the Lord will destroy this city." But he seemed to them as one that mocked. Lot's influence was gone. He had lived too long in Sodom and had made too much money there and formed too many bonds of family and business there to be taken seriously now, when he reasoned of righteousness and judgment to come. That may happen to a father or mother in their home, to a minister in his Church. If Lot had taken that course when he first came there, they might have listened to him, but not now. He seemed to them as one that mocked. Only his two daughters and his wife could he persuade to go with him, and when the morning came, he himself was wavering and lingering, and had to be forcibly ejected from the doomed city. The angels commanded him to look not behind him and stay not in the plain, but escape to the mountain lest he be consumed. But Lot, panic-stricken, weeping over the loss of treasures in Sodom, fearing flames wherever he went, thinking the mountains will be too high

and too distant for him, and that a very little city will escape the general doom, begs the angel to change the orders and permit him to stop in the little town of Zoar. "Oh, not so my Lord: I cannot escape to the mountain lest some evil take me and I die. Behold now this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one. Oh, let me escape thither (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live!"

To come down from the contemplation of Abraham and speak of Lot, is like descending from a great mountain where the air is pure and the panorama magnificent, to a low plain where the heat is intense and the air is filled with dust and smoke. One man set his affections on high; the other set his affections on things on earth. One left all to obey God: the other forsook God to seek this world. Peter speaks of him as "righteous Lot", and how his righteous soul was vexed with the daily exhibitions of wickedness in Sodom; but the facts are that he deliberately chose to settle there, that he went back after he had been warned by one judgment, that he made connections there, and that even angels with writs of fiery judgment in their hands could scarce move him to forsake the place. In some respects Lot is like Judas: he

had a leaning towards God and faith; he had sufficient discernment to start the life of faith, but he followed timidly, half-heartedly, unwilling to pay the costs, and made a complete failure of it. He is of the earth, earthy; Abraham is in the world, but not of it.

Nothing shows the contrast between these two men so much as the kind of prayer they offered. Abraham whose own life and property were not jeopardized, prayed for the salvation of the cities; he asked no petition for himself. But Lot has no word to ask for the doomed city where he had made his wealth; not a syllable of petition that God spare it if He found but ten good men there. His prayer is a weak, whimpering whine for his own comfort and ease. His sole ends were those miserable aims that end with self. As he chose for himself when the dispute arose with Abraham, so now he thought only of himself. Never was a poorer, more selfish prayer offered, yet it was this prayer that was answered, while the noble intercession of Abraham was not granted. Men must be careful about advertising the answers to their prayer and take more thought about the kind of prayer they offer. "He gave them their requests, but sent leanness into their soul." It would be

sad for us if some of our prayers were answered. We ought not to pray because we see answers, but we ought to pray and not to faint, because we believe in God.

Lot's ignoble petition showed a man who could go a little distance in the right way, but shrank from the whole journey. He was afraid to take the consequences of obedience and righteousness. He could start out of the doomed city, but the mountains were too much for him. "Oh, my Lord, let me stop in this little city. If I go to the mountains I perish." How common his type is. The command of God is flashed upon a man's soul, and he sees the way he ought to go and does start on that way, but before he has gone far, he sinks down in some little city not far from his old habitation, where the manners and customs are not much different. The mountains of high endeavor and lofty ambition fade on the soul's horizon. Is not that the fate which overtakes so many of our Church members? They started well; they knew that they ought to follow Christ and keep His commandments. But the new way presented difficulties; the thought of the things they were giving up weighed heavily upon them; their zeal cooled; their enthusiasm subsided. Where are

they now? Living in the quarter-way or half-way houses of compromise and stagnation. They do not formally turn and go back into Sodom and its ruins; they maintain a connection with the Church, but are content with the minimum of labor and effort that will hold their Church membership, slipping occasionally into their pews on a Sunday morning, appearing once or twice in the year at a Communion service, though one would think that if there were any service they would be careful to avoid, that would be it, for it speaks of broken vows and forsaken dreams; contributing a little now and then to the expenses of the Church, but traveling nowhere, shriveled souls dwelling in petty, little Zoars.

The mountains are a long way off, and the road thither is rough and steep, but if God tells us to go there He will supply the strength. His commands are not grievous. He asks us to do nothing that with His aid we cannot do. But it will always involve some labor and sacrifice. Who knows but that even now I may address some soul who has heard a command of conscience urging it to a mountain journey, to write a letter, to make a visit, to seek a reconciliation, to perform a work, to take a stand. It means the forsaking of your

place of ease and comfort. It is so much easier to stay where you are, to let the command to go to the mountains grow dull in your ear. If so, remember Lot. "Remember Lot's wife" is the exhortation of Scripture; but there are some things about Lot himself that are worthy of careful recollection, and this is one of them. Instead of asking God to have pity on your weakness and inability and let you settle down in the Zoar of failure and compromise, risk everything for Him. Lift up your eyes unto the hills, unto the mountains, from whence cometh your aid.

"Courage, brother! do not stumble,
Though thy path be dark as night;
There's a star to guide the humble;
Trust in God, and do the right.
Let the road be rough and dreary,
And its end far out of sight,
Foot it bravely, strong or weary;
Trust in God and do the right."

"Is it not a little one?" pleaded Lot with the Angels. Because the town was just a bit of a village, he seems to think that God would not destroy it. Here we see the man who will not live in a Sodom of gross licentiousness and dishonesty and infidelity, but has no scruples about the suburban residences of what they call pec-

cadilloes, little transgressions. This distinction between little sins and great sins is a remnant of the old teaching about venial sin and mortal sins; venial, those which weaken but do not destroy sanctifying grace; mortal, those which are deadly, fatal, not to be pardoned. But in these so-called little sins lurks the greatest peril. In the first place, they may develop into the grosser faults. E. J. Hardy in a sermon on this text, quotes a saying of Bishop Butler that "The greatest evils in life have had their rise from somewhat which was thought of too little importance to be attended to." At first Lot only pitched his tent towards Sodom. Our narrative finds him a citizen there. In the second place, these little sins are committed so easily that a man may drift into a state of mind and conscience in which his life is wrong and godless and yet never feel uncomfortable, whereas a great crime and sin, with all its menace for the soul, may, possibly, by its very shock open a man's eyes and urge him to repentance.

All of us are apt to have at least some property holdings in Zoar. A man will not steal, but he will overwork his employees. A man will not lie about his neighbor, but he will take up an evil report against the President of the United States and

slander his name without the slightest compunction of conscience. A man will not be guilty of open cruelty to his fellow man, but he will in his own home be unkind and thoughtless. A man will not defile the temple of the Holy Ghost with impurity, but he will let his temper run wild and think nothing of it. A man will not take the name of God in vain, but he will act in a churlish, unchristian manner when he finds his pew filled in Church, and his conscience never trouble him. But our distinctions are not God's. In the quaint sentence of Matthew Henry, "There is no sin little because there is no little God to sin against." God's directions bid us go to the mountains. He makes no provision for a stopping place in between Sodom and the mountains. Whatever that Zoar may be in which we like to dwell, let us quit it. Sooner or later it must be abandoned, even as Lot got no peace in the city of his prayer and quit it in fear and terror. Laying aside therefore every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, let us run with patience the race set before us, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, Who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross and despised the shame. In every successful Christian life, those two elements

must have a place and influence—the grace of enduring and the grace of despising. There are things which must be endured, and there are things which the natural man in us loves; no question about it: but which the new man in Christ Jesus must despise and discount.

The end of Lot is sad and dismal. When Peter called him "righteous Lot" I suppose he was thinking of that one courageous deed in Lot's life when he braved the fury of the passion-inflamed mob in Sodom and was rebuked by them for judging their crimes. He did have the root distinction between good and evil; he knew what it was to have good impulses sweep over his soul; but if ever he tried to do the will of God, it was timidly, half-heartedly, fearing the costs. To what an end did this man come! In the beginning he chose Sodom. "Let Abraham do the praying and altar-building. I will make a fortune in Sodom." Now Sodom and all its wealth is in ashes. God rained fire and brimstone upon it. He asked to settle down in Zoar; but even there he is panic-stricken and flees to the hills and lives in a cave. In his family he had carried Sodom's vices even to that distant place. There the curtain drops in awful blackness of darkness. There is the man who

sought first the kingdom of this world, all his riches and comforts stripped from him; nothing left now but a cave in the rocks. Farewell, Lot! If Abraham teaches us how to pray, thou hast taught us how *not* to pray. If Abraham teaches how to choose that better part, thou hast taught us how *not* to choose. If Abraham tells us of the riches of faith and righteousness, even though he owns nothing but Machpelah's cave for his dead, thou hast taught us how it is not all gold that glitters, and thou hast given us one of Scripture's most striking, unforgettable answers to the sum set us by the Lord of Life Himself, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

III

THE PRAYER OF JACOB

III

THE PRAYER OF JACOB

"I will not let thee go except Thou bless me. Tell me, I pray Thee, Thy name."—GENESIS 32:26, 29

I have often read this story of midnight prayer; I have studied it, written about it, preached about it, but always with a sense of complete failure. Nor have I ever read any exposition of the chapter which helped me much. Yet we all feel that this is one of the great passages of the Bible and a classic in the prayer literature of mankind. It is not the anthropomorphism of the narrative—God described as an actual wrestler—that troubles us, for in the prayer of Abraham we had three men coming down and One of them remaining to talk with Abraham. It is not the form in which the history is recorded which perplexes us, but the meaning of the history itself. The truth is, this prayer of Jacob brings us to the borderland of the spiritual mysteries of our life. Writing of the ocean, Lord Byron told of how with him to look upon it was to

"Mingle with the universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal."

We read this page from the life of Jacob and think that we are on the margin of high and holy ground; we feel what we can never express, yet cannot all conceal.

Let us recall the events which led up to this midnight struggle. There were two very solitary hours in the life of Jacob. The first was when he lay down to sleep at Bethel, a guilty, conscience-stricken man, fleeing from the wrath of the outraged Esau. He must have felt himself the loneliest man on the face of the earth, the stone for his pillow, the desert for his bed. All his planning and schemings had brought him nought but exile and dread. The second solitary hour was this night on the fords of the Jabbok, when he had sent his people across the brook before him, and waited in the midnight stillness by himself. It was twenty years since Jacob had cheated Esau out of the blessing and had trapped him into selling the birthright for a mess of pottage. By perseverance and cunning he had made his way to wealth and independence. He was now on his way back to Canaan, the land of his fathers. But as he draws near the borders of the country, memory commences to recall the scenes and events of his youth. A band of angels had just met him; but Jacob was

restless and uneasy. The sin against Esau rose before him and its memory burned like a canker. He had wives, herds, possessions, and he is about to cross over into Canaan, but in his heart there is a dull foreboding of evil and vengeance. Had Esau forgotten the wrong? Would not twenty years with all their changing scenes and events have obliterated from the mind of Esau the recollection of the low trick Jacob had played him? Or, if he still remembered it, would he take vengeance, or would he forgive and be reconciled?

A German writer on the Old Testament has said of the life of Jacob, "The stories about Jacob do not pretend to be moral. The feeling they betray is indeed that of undissembled joy in all the successful tricks of the patriarchal rogue." Such a comment only goes to show how the greatest intellects may read the Bible and miss the truth altogether. If the life of Jacob teaches anything, it is the lesson that the way of the transgressor is hard. It is a study in retribution. Jacob opened his history by cheating. Down in Mesopotamia he falls in love with Rachel and is promised her hand at the end of seven years of labor. But at the end of that long service, he found that Laban had deceived him and he had to labor seven more.

Now move on to the sunset of Jacob's life. His heart is bound up in the life of Joseph. One day his sons come in before him and display the well known coat of many colors, spotted and stained with blood. The old man looked on the coat and knew it. "It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and daughters rose up to comfort him but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down to the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him." Is it possible that any man, though a fool, could read that narrative and not see the workings of the law of judgment and retribution? "As I have done, so the Lord hath requited me."

In order to sound his brother, Jacob dispatched messengers to greet him and sue for his favor. This message Esau answered with significant silence. The messengers came back saying, "We came to thy brother Esau, and moreover he cometh to meet thee and four hundred men with him." In mere craft and cunning Jacob was not afraid to meet any adversary. But the thought of this wild Bedouin brother filled him with dread. His sin

was finding him out. Years ago, a mess of pottage given for a birthright; now, four hundred armed men coming to meet him. We can be sure of one thing: our sin will find us out: in time, in conscience, in eternity.

Although thoroughly alarmed, Jacob has some of his old resourcefulness left. He divides his caravan into two parts so that if Esau should fall upon one, the other would have a chance to escape. These two bands Jacob sends on before him in the dead of the night. He himself remains behind. Why did he stay? Jacob himself could not have told. Are there not carefully chosen actions in our life for which we could not give an account? You felt that you must go, but could not say why. You felt that you must remain, that to go was impossible, but never tried to explain, even to yourself, what it was that held you there. The solitary hours of life are not infrequently the grandest. In the dusty glare of life, marching with the pressing throng of duties and pleasures and burdens, man loses his impression of God and the eternities. In the confused babel of voices the note of the higher strain is drowned and lost. But in these most solitary hours, the voices of the garish day are hushed and the soul hears God

speak. And Jacob was left alone. "He was alone with the Alone." Utter detachment, complete isolation, that is the price we may have to pay for the experience that Jacob had this night. "And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day."

During the course of this mysterious conflict, the man twice addressed himself to Jacob and Jacob twice spake to the man. Each time the words of Jacob were a prayer. The first prayer was answered; the second was not answered. We shall look now at the second petition of Jacob, his unanswered prayer. "Tell me, I pray thee, thy Name?" This prayer came at the end of the conflict when the stranger had conferred upon Jacob a great blessing, and also after the touch in the thigh had impressed Jacob with the fact that he was contending with an Adversary against whom his own strength was as nothing. He asked just what you and I would have asked after such an experience. Who are you? What is your Name? If an unknown person had done you either a great service or a great injury, that is what you would like to know, Who is he, and what is his name? When the same angel had appeared unto Manoah and his wife in the field and had told them of the

birth of their son, Samson, that was what they asked him, "What is thy name, so that when thy words come to pass, we may do thee honor? And the angel of the Lord said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret?" The same answer he gave to wondering Jacob, "Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my Name?"

The prayer of Jacob voices man's great cry after the living God. Man is not content to remain on his little island. He must venture out upon that great ocean obscured by the mists, or bounded by the horizon of limited earthly vision, and explore the unknown. That is the greatness of man, the fact that he asks for the Name of God. In Jacob wrestling all through the night with an unknown adversary, we behold mankind struggling with the unseen powers of life. What does life mean? Whence have I come? Whither am I going? What heart is planning? What hand is guiding? "Oh that I knew where I might find Him that I might come even to His seat! Behold, I go forward, but He is not there; backward, but I cannot perceive Him; on the left hand where He doth work, but I cannot behold Him; He hideth Himself on the right hand that I cannot see Him."

It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; man's glory to seek it out. Man has no rest from this quest after the knowledge of God. The puzzling thing is that our life and this world, which speaks so forcibly of God, of a great Will and Purpose behind the universe, yet hides the Being of God. There are mighty engines which revolve so rapidly and turn so smoothly that by sight or hearing one could hardly discern that they were in operation. Is not the working of God on that order? In the line of Faber's hymn,

> "He hides Himself so wondrously,
> As if there were no God."

All the systems of human philosophy which have drifted all the way from out-and-out materialism to shadowy idealism, what are they but man's effort to give an account of the universe, and therefore, his ceaseless asking after the Name of God. The "Two Voices" of Tennyson was written during a period of great depression consequent upon the death of a beloved sister. In that poem there is an echo of Jacob's cry, "Tell me Thy Name!"

> "Who forged that other influence
> That heat of inward evidence,
> By which he doubts against the sense?

"He owns the fatal gift of eyes,
That read his spirit blindly wise,
Not simple as a thing that dies.

"Here sits he shaping wings to fly;
His heart forbodes a mystery;
He names the name Eternity.

"That Type of Perfect in his mind
In nature can he nowhere find.
He sows Himself on every wind.

"He seems to hear a Heavenly Friend,
And through thick veils to apprehend
A labor working to an end."

How true it is that Nature suggests a type of Perfect, but also hides from us the Perfect One. The same sentiment was voiced long ago by the eloquent Pascal in his celebrated "Thoughts", where he writes,

"Nature has some perfections, to show that she is the image of God; and some defects, to show that she is only his image."

DeFoe's hero gazes intently upon the footprint in the sands of his solitary island, but wonders where the man is who made the impression with his foot. Neither on his island nor on the encircling sea could he behold, or had ever beheld, a human being. Yet there was the footprint. Nothing but man could have made it, nothing but

man could ever have explained it. I remember a book in my father's library, "Footprints of the Creator," the witness of geology to the wisdom of God. Here are God's footprints, but where is God? Jacob knew that he had been contending with some one. But who was he? Tell me Thy Name. Man knows that in his long nights of struggle and pain, in the daylight of his joys and victories, in the twilight of his dreams and visions, in the starlight of his hopes, in the lightning flashes of his judgments, that he is meeting and contending with One Who is more than man. But just Who is He and What is He and Where is He? Unknown God, tell me Thy Name!

This prayer of Jacob was not answered. God's Name is secret. There is a "thus far and no farther" to the rolling ocean of our explorations. When the day began to dawn, the Angel said to Jacob, "Let me go, for the day breaketh." Divinity will not submit itself to the tests of sense. "Behold I show you a mystery," said St. Paul, in his chapter on the Resurrection. If we knew God's Name, that is, as we know one another, He would not be God. God would be gone. This craving to have all mystery swept away from between us and God can never be answered. You

cannot expect to know as much as God. In this life we can never know the Name, comprehend the Being of God. God answers us as He answered Jacob, as He answered Manoah, "Wherefore dost thou ask after My Name, seeing it is secret?"

The prayer for God's Name was not answered; but the other prayer for a blessing—"I will not let thee go except thou bless me"—that was answered. "And he blessed him there." Jacob could not tell men the Name of God, but he could tell men that God was, and that God was good. Now it is a different Jacob that we see, a man who has been told that he cannot define God, and yet "Israel," one who has power with God. This is Hosea's comment on that midnight encounter, "Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept and made supplication unto Him: he found Him in Bethel, and there he spake with us." "There he spake with us." From that meeting with God dates all that is spiritual and holy in Jacob's life. When he has reached the end of his long pilgrimage and lifts his withered hands in blessing on the sons of Joseph, it is not the namelessness of God, the mystery of God, that is on his mind, but it is the goodness of God, the kindness of God, the mercy of God, of which he makes

mention: "The God before Whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God who hath fed me all my life long unto this day, the angel who hath redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads." In vain he had asked for God's Name, but not in vain had he yielded at last to God. The prayer that He would bless us, that He would give us faith to follow Him, to trust in Him, this is a prayer that is never left unanswered. The answer to our prayer may come through peace and prosperity, or it may come, as with Jacob, through the midnight struggle, through the dark and mysterious visitation of sorrow and of temptation and of pain. But however dark may be the process, the result is light. The sun rose upon him as he passed over Penuel. God's blessing is ever sunrise for the soul. Job lamented that he could not find God and understand Him as he would like to do; but he comforted himself with the reflection that God could find him: "He hideth Himself on the right hand that I cannot see Him, but He knoweth the way that I take; when He hath tried me I shall come forth as gold." You do not know the way that you take, but God knows that way. There are burdens, trials, perplexities? Of course; that is life. Be-

cause God does not tell you His Name, because He does not tell you the reason for His decrees, do not imagine that He cannot or will not bless you. Your very night breaks at length into dawn and sunlight. "Fear not, only believe!" said Jesus to the Ruler of the synagogue when the tidings came that his daughter was already dead. Everything was against the Ruler's faith, the message of his servants, his own knowledge of what death was. Against all these Jesus put faith. Nothing but faith; yet everything by faith. We must choose between our fears and our faith. Some choose their fears and some choose their faith, and these last have chosen the better part.

One of the noblest interpretations of Jacob's midnight struggle is Charles Wesley's great hymn which is based upon the incident:

"Come, O thou traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee;
With Thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.

* * * * *

"Yield to me now, for I am weak,
But confident in self-despair;

Speak to my heart, in blessings speak;
Be conquered by my instant prayer.
Speak or Thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me if Thy Name be Love.

"My prayer hath power with God; the grace
Unspeakable I now receive;
Through faith I see Thee face to face—
I see Thee face to face and live!
In vain I have not wept and strove—
Thy nature and Thy Name is Love."

IV

THE PRAYER OF BALAAM

IV

THE PRAYER OF BALAAM

"Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his."—NUMBERS 23:10

"Balaam also, the son of Beor, they slew with the sword."—NUMBERS 31:8

That was not the end he had asked for, but it was the end he deserved. What he asked for was this: "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his." That was the way he wanted to die, but his whole life was such as led him step by step to this death on the field of battle, mingled with the heaps of fallen Midianites upon whom the Lord God had taken vengeance. Balaam's prayer was not answered; but it was Balaam's fault and not God's. It was a good prayer and one that will always be answered if one lives as well as prays for that end.

Balaam is one of the most remarkable men who confront us on the pages of the Old Testament, that rich and inexhaustible source of character-study. What amazing inconsistencies and baffling

contradictions and puzzling paradoxes he presents! His life impressed itself upon the minds of the New Testament writers, and three of them—Peter, John and Jude—have very striking things to say about Balaam. They hold him up to perpetual scorn and obloquy; yet the words that Balaam uttered are among the most familiar sayings of the Bible, and the lips of the devout and the faithful have repeated them, and will repeat them to the end of time: "God is not a man that he should lie, nor the son of man that he should repent." "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his." "I shall see him, but not now. I shall behold him but not nigh. For a star shall come out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel." Nothing could surpass the eloquence and beauty of the prophecies which he made standing on the hilltops of Moab. They tower like mountains among the psalms and prophecies of the Bible. Yet Peter writes of the "madness of the prophet," and Jude of the "error of Balaam," and John of the "doctrine of Balaam."

There he stands on the cloudy borderland between superstition and inspiration. Like Job and Melchizedek, one of those outside the circle of the Chosen People upon whom the Spirit came.

"O for a sculptor's hand,
That thou might'st take thy stand,
Thy wild hair floating on the eastern breeze,
Thy tranced yet open gaze
Fix'd on the desert haze,
As one who deep in heaven some airy pageant sees!

At first sight and thought we might conclude that, intensely interesting as he is, going from mountain top to mountain top, his garments streaming in the wind, and his face radiant with vision, there could be no character in the Bible less appointed for our guidance and warning. But the longer we look at him the nearer does he come to our day. The plains and mountains fade away, and Balaam walks the streets of our cities and sits in the pews of our churches. The flowing garments give place to the habiliments of our day, and the eloquent apostrophes and indignant refusals and childish coaxings look very much like the aspirations and protests and sins of our own hearts. No character in the Bible is more modern than Balaam.

When the children of Israel appeared on the borders of Moab and Midian, the kings of those lands feared that what had happened to Og king of Bashan and Sihon king of the Amorites would happen to them. It is always easier to have some one else get rid of your difficulties and dangers for you,

instead of facing them yourself. Balak went on that principle when he sent ambassadors to the far east, clear to the borders of the Euphrates, to invite Balaam to curse Israel. The plan did not work out as the king of Moab had hoped. You can never get rid of your difficulties and trials and temptations by cursing them or by pushing them off on some one else. There is just one way: take your sword in your hand and go forth to meet them.

With the rewards of divination, the ambassadors came to Balaam and asked him to curse Israel, for "whom thou blessest is blest and whom thou cursest is cursed." Balaam might have gone and pretended to curse, taken the cash, and come back home. But, tragic as his career is, he stands on a higher plane than that. He asks of Him in Whose Name he both blesses and curses. And God said, "Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people, for they are blessed." With that message they returned to their master. But Balak believed that Balaam had his price. He sent princes and more honorable than they, and a caravan laden with gold, and a promise of not only gold but honor and renown. Balaam, with a feigned indignation, said, "If Balak would give me

his house full of gold, I cannot go beyond the Word of the Lord, to do less or more." There is just a suggestion of boasting in those words that prepares us for what follows: "Tarry ye also here this night, that I may know what the Lord will speak." This marks the first breakdown in the character of Balaam.

God had spoken once and plainly. These men had not come with a different request. It was the same. They wanted Balaam to curse the same people. Balaam knew that, yet he said, "Stay another night. Perhaps God will change His mind." In the morning God said, "Go." And when he went, God's anger was kindled because he went. It is a dark day for the soul when a man begins to trifle and to tamper with conscience. At the first request that he curse Israel, God spake so that Balaam could not misunderstand. But, caught by the love of gold and honor, Balaam tries to make God change His mind. He was not true to the light that was in him and that light went out; the light that was in him was turned into darkness, and how great was that darkness! In things moral and spiritual, the first intimations of the heart are right and true altogether. If you are going to buy a house or a horse or a parcel of

ground, it is well to spend a second night or day in thinking it over; but in matters of duty, do what the voice of the first night tells you; walk by that light that God and conscience always flash upon your course. Wait for the second night, and wait for the second flash, and you are lost.

When you feel that you must ask others whether this proposed course of action is right or wrong; when you begin to search your mind and heart for reasons why it is right; when you must spend several days and several nights in bringing yourself to feel comfortable with regard to it, then be sure that it is wrong. What you are doing is throwing a sop to conscience. You are trying to do what Balaam tried to do when he had the ambassadors spend a second night. O, do not trifle with your sense of right and wrong. It is heaven's most precious gift to you. When God rings that bell of conscience in your heart, answer at once, for to wait, to try to muffle the ringing of the bell, to try to change its meaning, is to commit soul-suicide.

"Then keep thy conscience sensitive,
No inward token miss,
And go where grace entices thee;
Perfection lies in this."

Balaam is one of the most gifted men of the Old Testament, and Paul one of the most gifted men of the New Testament; and yet the difference between them in character and influence is unspeakable. One is the synonym for shame, apostasy, covetousness: the other is the touchstone of devotion and love and faith. But that difference was only a question of time. When God spake to Paul, he answered immediately, "What wilt thou have me to do? Immediately I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision." When God spake to Balaam, he waited for a second night, hoping that God would speak in a different voice that night.

With the first streak of the morning light, Balaam was off towards Moab. If he believed that God permitted him to curse also, he was only caught in the net of deceit and soul jugglery that he had woven for himself. The permission of his own lusting heart was taken for the clear command of God, for when a man will not be sincere with the truth and with God, then, with the froward man God shows himself forward. It is quite possible for you so to coax and soothe and confuse your conscience that you may live an evil, wicked life and think all the time that you are living a good and

righteous, God-pleasing life, merely because your own conscience does not blame you.

But one day there is a reckoning, a disillusionment. Before this eager prophet, bent on filthy lucre, stands the Angel of God with drawn sword. What even a dumb ass could see and hear, this man, carried away with the sinful desire, could not see and could not hear. Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the Angel of Jehovah standing in the way with His sword drawn in His hand. And Balaam said—what? What we all say, what anyone says when he sees the drawn sword of Judgment, "I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me. Now, therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again." But he found it was not so easy to go back as he imagined. The Angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go!" Do not think of this as just a bit of old Hebrew history. That man and that Angel are facing each other day by day in our homes, churches and streets. A man may so dull the voice of conscience and so play with the sense of right and wrong, and go so far with the evil habit and expedition that he cannot turn back whenever it pleases him. He has set in motion forces and powers that reveal their strength and

grip only when he turns against them. Fear and dismay and misgiving and shrinking cry out, "I will go back again;" but habit and custom and diseased will and indulged passion all fling back at him the stern command, "Go!" So Balaam went with the prince of Balak.

All that henceforth happens to Balaam is only the result of his former disloyalty to the light that God gave him. He died years afterwards on the field of battle, but the real man died when he began to put his wish above God's command. He would not utter words of cursing, but wherever Balak took him, he looked upon Israel and blessed them in terms of splendor unapproached in the Bible. Yet all the time he was wishing them accursed, and when he could not curse them with words, he set himself to tempt them to idolatry and sensuality so that their own deeds would curse them. But over that black furnace of his heart sounds the grand music of these blessings and prophecies as he surveys the camp of Israel and beholds their future. For one moment he is lifted out of himself and wishes for himself the blessing that God's children will have: "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his!" But alas! passing emotions and transitory wishes are

not enough. He longed for the end and blessing of the Hebrews, but his life did not square with the wish.

In a way that we can hardly estimate, men dispense with their duty towards God and their arrangements for one day meeting Him in judgment by pious wishes. I suppose you could not find a man, even the basest, who at some time or other did not have a wave of godly desire and loathing of sin come over him. The beauty of righteousness, and how in the long run it is infinitely better to live the humble Christian life—that comes home to every man. But the danger is that we are deceived into thinking that in that very wave of emotion or remorse or high longing, there is saving grace and power. I come into church and the music and architecture and ordered worship lift and purify my thoughts. The strains of old hymns awaken echoes in the depths of the heart. I give assent to the sublime truths of the Gospel as they are read and spoken, and I go from that religious exercise feeling better, thinking more about God, and having a greater desire to strip my soul of meanness and envy and hatred and greed and pride and jealousy and self-worship. Be not deceived. Balaam felt that way

and gave utterance for all others who have felt that way, in words of music and beauty and grace. But how did Balaam die? He died just as he had lived, not as he had wished to die, an enemy of God. O, remember it is possible to have noble ambitions and heavenly aspirations and agree to sublime truths and live, and, in the end, die unreconciled to God!

"Let me die the death of the righteous!" And he said it in a way that would lead you to think he intended to live the life of the righteous. But I turn the page, and here is a description of a battle between the Israelites and the Midianites who had tempted Israel to uncleanness and idolatry. Among the heaps of the slain, where the vultures gather over the corpses, what pierced and mangled body is this, with the robe of divination all rent and torn, and the gray hairs all clotted with blood, and wild eyes staring up at the heaven? It is the body of him who prayed "Let me die the death of the righteous!" "Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword!"

The study of this man is not of a nature to make many of us boast or put any reliance in his own strength or his own heart. When we face the perils and seductions of evil, confront the forces

which destroyed the soul of Balaam, and can destroy ours too, there is no room for pride. But thank God there is a refuge for us in the Rock of Ages. There is a Saviour for us in Jesus Christ and there is redemption by His blood. He not only inspires us with the wish for the righteous life, but He gives us power to overcome. He is able to keep us from falling and to present us before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.

The saving light of Christ perhaps flashed across the horizon of Balaam when he cried, "The star shall rise of Jacob and a sceptre out of Israel." However it may have been with him, that Star has appeared for you and me. Unto us Christ is preached in the Gospel. May we hear Him and follow Him. I conclude with John Keble's poem on Balaam, one of the best sermons ever preached on the subject:—

"O for a sculptor's hand,
That thou might'st take thy stand,
Thy wild hair floating on the eastern breeze,
Thy tranced yet open gaze
Fix'd on the desert haze,
As one who deep in heaven some airy pageant sees.

"In outline dim and vast
Their fearful shadows cast
The giant forms of empires on their way

To ruin: one by one
They tower and they are gone,
Yet in the Prophet's soul the dreams of avarice stay.

"No sun or star so bright
In all the world of light
That they should draw to Heaven his downward eye:
He bears th' Almighty's word,
He sees the angel's sword,
Yet low upon the earth his heart and treasure lie.

"Lo! from yon argent field,
To him and us reveal'd,
One gentle Star glides down, on earth to dwell.
Chain'd as they are below
Our eyes may see it glow,
And as it mounts again, may track its brightness well.

"To him it glared afar,
A token of wild war,
The banner of his Lord's victorious wrath:
But close to us it gleams,
Its soothing lustre streams
Around our home's green walls, and on our churchway path.

"We in the tents abide
Which He at distance eyed
Like goodly cedars by the waters spread,
While seven red altar-fires
Rose up in wavy spires,
Where on the mount he watch'd his sorceries dark and dread.

"He watch'd till morning's ray
On lake and meadow lay,
And willow-shaded streams, that silent sweep
Around the banner'd lines,
Where by their several signs
The desert-wearied tribes in sight of Canaan sleep.

"He watch'd till knowledge came
Upon his soul like flame,
Not of those magic fires at random caught:
But true Prophetic light
Flash'd o'er him, high and bright,
Flash'd once, and died away, and left his darken'd thought.

"And can he choose but fear,
Who feels his God so near,
That when he fain would curse, his powerless tongue
In blessing only moves?—
Alas! the world he loves
Too close around his heart her tangling veil hath flung.

"Sceptre and Star divine,
Who in Thine inmost shrine
Hast made us worshippers, O claim Thine own:
More than Thy seers we know—
O teach our love to grow
Up to Thy heavenly light, and reap what Thou hast sown."

V

THE PRAYER OF MOSES

V

THE PRAYER OF MOSES

"Let me go over, I pray Thee, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon."—DEUT. 3:25

One of our hymns asks that we may be taught the "patience of unanswered prayer." We have before us now a prayer that was not answered, and an exhibition of patience in the man who prayed but did not receive. The unanswered prayers of the Bible, the prayer of Abraham that Ishmael might live before the Lord, of Balaam that he might die the death of the righteous, of Paul over the thorn in his flesh, of Jesus over His cup of agony, are in many respects the most profitable unto our instruction and comfort.

Israel's forty years of wandering were at an end. From the Red Sea to the Jordan, Moses had led his people, and they now lay encamped on the other side of Jordan ready to pass over into Canaan. We can imagine what the feelings of Moses must have been. The work for which, at the beginning, and many a time since, he had felt himself unable,

had been brought to a successful consummation. The people were ready to pass over. The land that had been the goal of all his labors and the content of all his dreams lay just there, on the other side of the river. At the time of a past offense, Moses had been warned that neither he nor Aaron would be permitted to bring the assembly into the land which God had given them. That word of the Lord came back to him now as he stood so near the promised land. He could not bear the thought of not crossing over and entering the land with the triumphant people. In his valedictory he tells Israel of his prayer: "And I besought the Lord at that time, saying, O Lord Jehovah, thou hast begun to show thy servant thy kindness, greatness, and thy strong hand: for what god is there in heaven or earth that can do according to thy works and according to thy mighty acts? Let me go over, I pray thee, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain and Lebanon. But the Lord was wroth with me for your sakes, and hearkened not unto me; and the Lord said unto me, Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto me of this matter. Get thee upon unto the top of Pisgah, and lift up thine eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and

behold with thine eyes; for thou shalt not go over this Jordan."

Disappointed but obedient, Moses encouraged Joshua, bade his people farewell, and then climbed Mount Nebo unto the top of Pisgah. There, with his raiment flowing in the winds, stood the man who had reached the great age of one hundred and twenty, but whose eye was not dim nor his natural force abated. His undimmed eye swept the magnificent panorama which unfolded itself before him, the blue mountains to the north, with here and there a peak that was crowned with snow, the palms of Jericho, plains, rocky ravines, rolling uplands, lakes, and perhaps in the far distance a gleam of the great sea. This was the land to which he had led his people. Like an inhalation, he drew in all its beauties and glories. But the vision was as brief as is an inhalation. One deep, earnest, longing look, and the days of Moses were ended. "And He buried him in the valley of Moab over against Beth Peor; but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day."

The unanswered prayer of Moses, the final disappointment of his eventful life, has back of it the story of transgression. When the people were at Kadesh, the supply of water failed and the as-

sembly complained bitterly and strove with Moses and Aaron. God directed Moses to take the rod and speak unto the rock and it would give forth its water. Moses gathered the people before the rock, but instead of addressing the rock as God had directed him, he took it upon him to address the people, calling them rebels, and then, in the passion of the moment, lifted the rod and smote the rock twice. The water came forth abundantly, for God would not permit His mercies to be stopped by man's wrath. But the public transgression of Moses was not forgiven. Immediately there came the announcement of his punishment; "Because ye have not sanctified me before the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." It was from this sentence that Moses at the end of his life prayed, but unavailingly, that he might be relieved.

As we read the story, it strikes us as a very severe sentence for a minor offense. If it was a sin, the offense of Moses leaned towards the side of virtue. Moses was angry with the people for their complaining and unbelief, and jealous for the honor of God. Some lighter sentence would have fitted the transgression, for what was it but a momentary

loss of temper on the part of a man who was bearing a tremendous burden and was always under a heavy strain.

We do not like to speak of the offense of Moses for we ourselves come under so much greater condemnation that we are made uneasy about God's view of our own faults. But there were three elements in this offense of Moses: disobedience, anger and pride. God told him to speak to the rock, but he smote it twice. He denounced the people as rebels when God had sent him to deliver them. He took credit to himself for bringing them the water out of the rock, saying, "Must *WE* fetch water for you out of the rock?" There are faults which in some men are more serious and blameworthy than in others. This offense was committed publicly before all the people by God's appointed leader and representative. We ought to be careful in making any difference between leader and people, between priest and laity: but the mere fact of his office makes profanity or loss of temper on the part of a minister a more serious offense than it is in others. The popular proverb is, "Like priest, like people." As the priest is, so will the people be. But God's prophet did not put it that way. What he said was this, "Like people,

like priest." The life of the people will influence that of the priest. The water cannot rise much higher than its source. Nevertheless, the office of the Christian ministry gives a special offensiveness to some transgressions. "That I can never stand for," said a man who was dining with me in a club one night, "a minister drinking like any other man!" You might take exception to his distinctions, and say that we live before man and in the sight of God as men, as individuals, and not as representatives of certain trades and professions, and God's inquiry will ignore such badges. But those who do a work for man in the name of Christ must ever take heed to themselves and to their influence upon others. Their office sheds a magnifying light upon their faults and sins.

In the death of Moses, before he entered the promised country, we see the lawgiver himself punished by the working of the law he promulgated. It is as if God chose this heroic man and published his punishment to the succeeding ages that they might learn how with God there is no light transgression and that the wages of sin is death. The wrath and anger of Moses, excusable as it may appear to us, shows how there was in him the seed of that sin, for the punishment and atonement

of which he gave the law of God to the people. In the best of mankind there lurks the seed of evil.

> "Full bright ye shine, insuperable stars;
> Yet if a man look hard upon you, none
> With total lustre blazeth, no, not one
> But hath some heinous freckle of the flesh
> Upon his shining cheek, not one but winks
> His ray, opaqued with intermittent mist
> Of defect; yea, you masters all must ask
> Some sweet forgiveness, which we leap to give."

Christ alone did the will of God perfectly, and upon His perfection, the perfection of life and the perfection of His sacrifice, all men, from Moses down to the meanest of our day, must rest for their salvation. "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life."

The fact that Moses was forbidden to enter the promised land because of past transgression does not take from, but rather adds to the pathos of that finish to his life on earth. So near the goal, and then to fall! But when we look back over life and the achievements of men, how often we see a Moses standing on Pisgah's summit, beholding the land but not entering it. He labors and other men enter into his labors. When the Confederate army under Hood was confronting Thomas at

Nashville, Grant sent repeated orders to Thomas to go out and give battle. Thomas was willing to fight, but not until his army was ready. The administration became alarmed and Grant dispatched Logan to relieve Thomas, and finally started himself. But before either he or Logan could reach Nashville, Thomas and his army had won the most complete and crushing victory of the Civil War. Sherman, writing of the incident, says of Thomas, and the tragedy that almost befell him—to end his great military career by being cashiered—"He acted in time, gained a magnificent victory and thus escaped so terrible a fate." That was the fate of Moses, to be removed just at the gates of victory. Lord Kitchener for two years silently bore the burden of preparing Britain's armies, but just when those armies were about to launch their great offensive and strike mortal blows to the foe, ere the nation could thank him, the man who raised the hosts went down to his death off the lone Orkneys. When Blake was coming home from victory on the seas, he prayed that he might live until he reached England; but just before the ship reached Plymouth harbor he expired. Henry Newbolt has thus imagined the passing of the Admiral:

"Oh, to be there for an hour when the shade draws in
beside the hedgerows,
And falling apples wake the drowsy noon:
Oh! for the hour when the elms grow sombre and human
in the twilight,
And gardens dream beneath the rising moon.

"Only to look once more on the land of the memories of
childhood,
Forgetting weary winds and barren foam;
Only to bid farewell to the combe and the orchard and
the moorland,
And sleep at last among the fields of home!

"So he was silently praying, till now when his strength
was ebbing faster
The Lizard lay before them faintly blue;
Now on the gleaming horizon the white cliffs laughed
among the coast-line,
And now the forelands took the shapes they knew.

"There lay the Sound and the Island with green leaves
down beside the water,
The town, the Hoe, the masts, with sunset fired—
Dreams! ay! dreams of the dead! for the great heart
faltered on the threshold,
And darkness took the land his soul desired."

Often do we wait and strive for some land of promise, some dear empire of the heart, but just as we are about to step across the border, the Invisible Hand draws us back. "Thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither."

Moses, when he saw that his prayer would not be answered, calmly acquiesced in God's prohibition and prepared to carry out the command given him, and ordain Joshua to be his successor. Whatever is denied us or forbidden us, one thing is always left us, and that is the best and the highest: obedience and the performance of duty. The heroic conduct of Moses, in the midst of his disappointment preparing for the safe crossing of the Jordan and the conquest of the land under the leadership of Joshua, has something of a parallel in the dedication of Abraham Lincoln to the great ends which had been sought by his administration. During the summer of 1864, he became convinced that he would not be reëlected. Dismissing the chagrin and disappointment of such a result at the polls, he made a secret covenant with himself to do all that he could to save the Union during the time which still remained of his first administration, and before the coming into office of General McClellan, for at that time Lincoln thought that McClellan would be elected President, and on a platform which would make it impossible for him to save the Union after his inauguration.

During all this journey from the Nile to the Jordan, Moses had asked God for just two things

for himself, one that he might see His face, and one that he might enter Canaan. Both of these requests were refused. A good man asked for the highest and did not receive. In Moses, standing yonder on Pisgah's lonely summit, seeing the good land beyond the Jordan, possessing it only with his eyes, there is a picture of mankind asking for things great and high, but never in this life finding an answer that is as great as the prayer. Glorious things we see with our eyes. Fair lands of promise tempt us on; but at the end of the journey we learn that this life cannot satisfy the hunger or the thirst of the soul. We commenced by seeking a city with walls and gates; we salute at the end a city which hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God, not of the earth, but eternal in the heavens. In the words of Principal Caird, "Man's intellectual and moral endowments are on a scale immeasurably larger than the needs of this present life demand, or than is required for any attainment in knowledge or goodness, which even the noblest and best of men reach in their earthly existence; and therefore we can only account for the disproportion by the conception of a future life in which these endowments shall find adequate scope." God hath set eternity in our hearts and no earthly

Canaan will satisfy us. Our glance is higher than our reach, and as Thomas Chalmers has eloquently expressed it, "He feels an interminable longing after noble and higher things which nought but immortality and the greatness of immortality can satiate."

In Moses, standing on the lone mountain top, seeing the vision of the earthly Canaan and then having it fade from his eyes as he is gathered to his unknown grave, we have the common experience of the believing man. He may think that God has forbidden him the world; but the truth is that the world could never satisfy him, and through the gateway of death, God calls him to the everlasting habitations of life which is to come. When death comes, men close their eyes to much that is dear to them. Death to us is like a prohibition, a grim barrier wall that forbids entrance into life's coveted joy. But God buries His child as He buried Moses. He is not forgotten nor abandoned. God takes care of him, and precious in His sight is the death of His saints.

The last chapter in the life of Moses should always be read in connection with the account in the Gospels of the Transfiguration of our Lord, where we are told that "as He prayed, the fashion of His

countenance was altered, and His raiment was white and glistering. And behold, there talked with Him two men, which were Moses and Elias: Who appeared in glory, and spake of His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem." The ambition of Moses to cross the Jordan with the host of Israel and enter the promised land, was not merely the desire of curiosity, but the fervent wish of the great leader to witness and have a part in the conquest of the land. He desired to see God's glory in the conquest of the land beyond the Jordan. Now, long centuries after he pleaded with God to cross over, he is raised from his lonely mountain grave and together with Elijah in glory beholds the glory of the Lord and is permitted to speak with Him, and with Elijah, concerning His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem; that is, the great work of redemption, the conquest of the kingdom of Satan which was to commence when Christ died upon Calvary.

When our prayers, to our view, remain unanswered, it is our privilege to remember that God may be pleased to answer them in a way of which we never dream, and that in very truth, He will do for us far above all that we can ask or think.

Those who are troubled about their unanswered petitions, and especially in behalf of the members of their own household, would do well to read the words which John Bunyan put into the mouth of Mr. Badman's wife when she lay dying. This good woman had prayed long and earnestly for the salvation of her godless husband, and for her household; but apparently without an answer. Yet she does not regret her prayers and declares that they go with her into the heavenly city:

"Are my prayers lost, are they forgotten, are they thrown over the bar? No, they are hanged upon the horns of the golden altar, and I must have the benefit of them myself that moment that I shall enter the Gate, in at which the righteous nation that keepeth truth shall enter. My prayers are not lost. My tears are yet in God's bottle. I would have had a crown and glory for my husband, and for those of my children that follow his steps, but so far as I can see yet, I must rest in the hope of having all myself."

Nothing finer on the death of Moses has ever been written than the poem, "The Burial of Moses," by C. F. Alexander.

"By Nebo's lonely mountain
On this side Jordan's wave,
In a vale in the land of Moab
There lies a lonely grave.

And no man knows that sepulchre,
And no man saw it e'er,
For the angels of God upturned the sod,
And laid the dead man there.

"That was the grandest funeral
That ever passed on earth.
But no man heard the trampling,
Or saw the train go forth:
Noiselessly as the daylight
Comes back when night is done,
And the crimson streak on ocean's cheek
Grows into the great sun.

"Noiselessly as the spring-time
Her crown of verdure weaves,
And all the trees on all the hills
Open their thousand leaves;
So without sound of music
Or voice of them that wept,
Silently down from the mountain crown
The great procession swept.

"Perchance the bald old eagle
On gray Beth-Peor's height,
Out of his lonely eyrie
Looked on the wondrous sight:
Perchance the lion, stalking,
Still shuns that hallowed spot,
For beast and bird have seen and heard
That which man knoweth not.

"But when the warrior dieth,
His comrades in the war,
With arms reversed and muffled drum,
Follow his funeral car;
They show the banners taken,
They tell his battles won,
And after him lead his masterless steed,
While peals the minute gun.

"Amid the noblest of the land,
We lay the sage to rest,
And give the bard an honored place
With costly marble drest,
In the great minster transept
Where lights like glories fall,
And the organ rings and the sweet choir sings
Along the emblazoned wall.

"This was the truest warrior
That ever buckled sword,
This the most gifted poet
That ever breathed a word;
And never earth's philosopher
Traced with his golden pen,
On the deathless page, truths half so sage
As he wrote down for men.

"And had he not high honor,—
The hillside for a pall
To lie in state while angels wait
With stars for tapers tall,

And the dark rock-pines like tossing plumes
Over his bier to wave,
And God's own hand, in that lonely land,
To lay him in the grave?

"In that strange grave without a name
Whence his uncoffined clay
Shall break again, O wondrous thought!
Before the judgment day,
And stand with glory wrapt around
On the hills he never trod,
And speak of the strife that won our life
With the Incarnate Son of God.

"O lonely grave in Moab's land!
O dark Beth-Peor's hill!
Speak to these curious hearts of ours,
And teach them to be still.
God hath His mysteries of grace,
Ways that we cannot tell;
He hides them deep, like the hidden sleep
Of him he loved so well."

VI

THE PRAYER OF JOSHUA

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THE PRAYER OF JOSHUA

"Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the Children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon in the valley of Aijalon!"

—JOSHUA 10:12

Joshua we think of as a fighter and a soldier, and not as a man of prayer. But prayer is a battlefield, and on that field, as well as on the visible and bloody field of carnage, Joshua was a great captain. The Angel of the Lord who appears so frequently in this narrative of the conquest to guide and direct Joshua, is a noble illustration of the truth that the great leaders and workers for righteousness in this world's history have themselves had an invisible and mighty Leader and Deliverer. Even those who, like Cyrus, did not know the true God, like Cyrus may have been girded and guided by God to do His will.

Jericho and Ai had fallen to the arms of Israel. The king of Jerusalem, the same who mutilated his captives by cutting off their thumbs and great

toes, formed a confederacy of five kings and marched against Gibeon, which had made a treaty with Israel. The Gibeonites sent an urgent message to Joshua asking for immediate help. A less honorable man than Joshua might have rejoiced at the dilemma of the treacherous people who had duped Israel into making peace with them. But the treaty was sacred in the eyes of Joshua, and with the assurance that not a man of them would stand before him, he made a rapid night march of twenty miles and fell upon the army of the five kings at Gibeon, driving them in utter confusion and with great slaughter down the mountain passes.

The battle is memorable for the natural phenomena which accompanied it, the rain of hailstones which slew more than the sword, and the prolongation of the daylight. The history tells us that Joshua appealed for more daylight in order to complete the overthrow of his enemy. That appeal is handed down to us in the form of poetry, and the writer of the Book of Joshua quotes it as coming from the Book of Jashar, a book of which we know nothing, save this reference to it, and that in the Second Book of Samuel, where it is said that David's lament over Saul and Jonathan,

the Song of the Bow, was written in the Book of Jashar. The fragment that we have in Joshua makes that hero say,

"Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon;
And thou, moon, in the valley of Aijalon.
And the sun stood still and the moon stayed,
Until the nation had avenged themselves of their enemy."

"Is not this written in the Book of Jashar? And the sun stayed in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the Lord fought for Israel."

It is outside the scope and purpose of this chapter to say anything about the stupendous miracle that is hinted at in this quotation from a lost and legendary book, and in the historian's own comment on the battle. Great are the controversies which have been waged over this miracle. On both sides many absurd positions have been taken, as when the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the time of Galileo, and even Martin Luther, repudiated the Copernican theory of the universe that the earth and moon revolve about the sun, on the ground that Joshua bade the sun, and not the earth, stand still. We need not expect the men

of centuries ago to have anticipated the discoveries of modern science. But as for the event itself, it is not to be too easily dismissed as representing just the wish of Joshua that the day might be lengthened and not the fight. Wellington asked for Blucher or night; Joshua asked for daylight. We are not to think, say some, that the day was actually lengthened for Joshua any more than when we read the Iliad and hear the prayer of Agamemnon that the sun may not set before he has conquered Troy, we take that to mean that the day was actually lengthened. But no one can read this narrative, without feeling that the writer is trying to give the impression that there was at this battle a miracle of extraordinary sublimity, so wonderful that there was never before or after a day like it. The record of a miracle like this naturally arouses more discussion than, for instance, the restoration of a withered hand by Jesus, for we know a little about the movements of these heavenly bodies, and our astronomers can picture the devastation, the crash of matter and the wreck of worlds, which would follow immediately the halting of either sun or moon. But while the solar system is bigger in bulk, it is no more wonderful than the circulatory system of

man's body, and the making of the blood to flow again through a withered arm is just as stupendous a miracle as halting the heavenly bodies in their courses. Both mean the arresting of what we call natural law by the Author of all law, and if God created the solar system and set the worlds running in their celestial grooves, certainly, if He did wish to halt the movement of those bodies, He could do so without harming the smallest world or the least inhabitant of that world.

But my theme is not miracles, nor is it a lesson in poetry, astronomy, or physics. It is the lesson in prayer that we are interested in now. Joshua asked for the prolongation of the day that he might finish his great victory. The gathering shades in the battle of Jutland, when the battle fleet had just swept into action, robbed the British of a great victory. Joshua wanted to win before the night set in. "Stand still, thou sun!" Forget now what may be said about that prayer being granted and the sun actually stopping, and think of what is common in our experience and in that of Joshua. With us time is passing. Joshua and Hezekiah may have had their day lengthened, but, that is the only time that the sun halted. Steadily, irresistibly, it rolls on in its chariot till its race is run.

Who can stop it? Who, with expectation of its actual halting, would ever pray the prayer of Joshua? No; instead of making that prayer, we grow sad and silent when we think of how noiselessly and how remorselessly time rolls on. Birthdays, anniversaries, New Year's Days, are annual reminders of the fact that the sun of life, whether it be rising or towards the going down, is always hurrying on towards its finish and sunset. Anything that we do or say or see for the last time touches us with sadness. I remember sailing down the Clyde with my mother. As she looked wistfully out upon the isles and mist-covered lochs and bays and mountains which had been the loved companions of her youth, she said, "The last time!" So, with inevitable sadness, we bid farewell to the year, no matter what has been its portion of sorrow or joy. We think of those who have gone out on the great journey, never again to see the shores of this ocean which has cradled their youth, and of those who may go in the same stretch of time in the year that is before us.

"While with ceaseless course the sun,
Hasted through the former year,
Many souls their race have run,
Never more to meet us here;

"Fixed in an eternal state,
They have done with all below.
We a little longer wait,
But how little, none can know."

Today the battle goes against us, the enemy presses us hard, the joy and spring is gone out of life, and if we could, we would shorten today. We would address the sun and say, "Thou sun, hasten to thy going down. Let the darkness close over me. Let me forget my life in death!" Tomorrow, the battle goes well; troops of friends, great work in hand, and other great work in prospect, health, success, happiness; and then our apostrophe is, "Thou sun, stand still! Let the day be lengthened. Postpone thy setting over this pleasant land of my life!" Both prayers are unheeded. On, on, the sun goes, heedless and changeless.

"Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

"Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And time that gave doth now his gift confound."

To pray for a special dispensation of time is a waste of time, for your days are numbered, and

however high the number may be, for one ten days, for another three hundred and sixty-five, for another five thousand, for all of us the time is short. Understanding that, we are ready to think of time, not in its length of days, but in its content, its opportunity. Since we cannot stop the sun, let us make use of its light. While we have the light let us walk in the light. We cannot add to the number of our days, but we can add to the meaning of each day. When we think of redeeming the time, instead of "killing" the time, our prayer will be that of Joshua, translated from the solar system to the spiritual system, "Sun, stand still in Gibeon, and thou moon in the valley of Aijalon!" I had a classmate in the seminary who, speaking of his work as a minister in some small village in New Jersey, said he was at a loss how to put in the time! But all who are enlisted like Joshua in some crusade for God are troubled, not by the excess of time, but by its brevity, and their prayer is for the sun to stand still till the work is done. In that heroic Hebrew warrior, standing on the bloody field and lifting his sword to heaven, and asking for more time in which to smite his foes, we have the picture of the true soldier of God, giving all earnestness to the duties of life, thinking of the needs of the poor,

the hungry, the sorrowing, the vicious, and so many of them going down before help can reach them. The sun may never stop, but in another sense the day is prolonged. As the prayer of Joshua was answered, so every earnest, industrious life will find time for doing work that is great because it is good.

Charlotte Bronte's life was short, her married life just a brief break in the clouds that had settled about her; but when they laid her beneath the snow in the churchyard, there stood by the grave one lonely woman who had been seduced and cast out, but loved and cherished by the gentle author; and another, a blind girl who begged neighbors to lead her over the wet, snowy roads that she might shed her tears over the grave of the woman who had been eyes to the blind. These two were but the representatives of a large class. Yes, time is short, but if you want to be kind, there is time and there is opportunity. But you must be in earnest and you must act now. The day for Joshua to smite the foe, the day of all days to be lengthened was *that* day, not the next day, nor the next. There is time to be forgiving and generous and true. There is time to be about your Father's business. There is time to seek the Lord while He may be found

and call upon Him while He is near. But that time is now, at once! Now is the accepted time, because it is the only time you have. In this higher sense, life is long or short according to the moral earnestness we put into it. Some live for almost a century, with hearts as dry as summer dust; they burn to the socket, and yet their life is pitifully brief; and others live only for a little period of time; they die young, but their lives are long, if we think not of revolutions of the earth about the sun, but of charity, of love, of honesty, of things that are lovely and of good report.

Joshua had this particular day lengthened; but when he came to die he realized how little he had accomplished. "Behold I go the way of all the earth, and there remaineth yet much land to be possessed." Even when life has been lived on the highest plane of religion and love, it must always seem incomplete. For a good man, time is too short. In the prayer of this battling soldier of Israel I hear the echo of man's prayer for immortal life. So many enemies that have not been smitten, so many kings that have not been taken, because the daylight was too brief. Towards the end of his life, Victor Hugo wrote on his seventieth birthday, "Winter is on my head, but eternal

spring is in my heart. The nearer I approach the end, the plainer I hear around me the immortal symphonies of the worlds which invite me. For half a century I have been writing my thoughts in prose, verse, history, philosophy, drama, romance, tradition, satire, ode, song—I have tried all. But I feel that I have not said the thousandth part of what is in me." Or, to quote the words of the eloquent French preacher Saurin, "Such is my soul. But where is it lodged? It inhabits a world of vanity and nothingness. I can discover no object capable of filling my capacious desires. I ascend the thrones of sovereigns; I descend into the beggar's dust; I walk the palaces of princes, I lodge in the peasant's cabin; I retire into the closet to be wise; I avoid recollection; choose ignorance and increase the crowd of idiots; I live in solitude; I rush into the social multitude, but everywhere I find a mortifying void. In all these places there is nothing satisfactory. In each I am more unhappy through the desire of seeing new objects, than satisfied with the enjoyment of what I have. How can I reconcile these things? How can I make the Creator agree with Himself? Although God has placed me in this world, He does not intend to limit my prospects to it; though

He has mixed me with mere animals, yet He does not intend to confound me with them; though He has lodged my soul in a frail, perishable body, yet He does not mean to involve it in the dissolution of this frame. Without supposing immortality, that which constitutes the dignity of man makes his misery."

The world too little for man, and life too short for man, that is the conclusion that is borne home to us when we see good and noble men die like Joshua with much land yet to be possessed and many powers yet to be put to the test. The sun sets at length upon this world, and then all its colors fade and disappear. But that only gives new meaning to the words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth on me shall never die." "Somewhere surely afar," there is a world that is commensurate with man's gifts and man's desires. Here the sun sinks and twilight comes, and after that, the dark. But yonder "their sun shall go down no more." Here they cry to the sun, "Stand still, thou sun, in Gibeon!" Yonder, they need no candle, neither light of the sun, for the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign for ever and aye.

VII

THE PRAYER OF DAVID

VII

THE PRAYER OF DAVID

"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"—II SAMUEL 18:33

When only a child of tender years, the greatest of Scottish preachers was overheard by his nurse repeating to himself this pathetic cry of the broken-hearted king. That nursery recitation was prophetic of the preacher who was to make his voice echo through the churches of Britain. It may seem to some that this is not a prayer, but an ejaculation. It is not addressed to God, but to Absalom. That is true. But if

> "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
> Uttered or unexpressed,
> The motion of a hidden fire
> That trembles in the breast,"

then, this cry of David is a prayer. Our most earnest prayers may spring from our hearts and lips at a time when we were thinking least of praying. Those exclamations of happiness which escape us in moments of great joy and those cries of pain and sorrow which we utter in moments of

pain and woe, what are they but prayers lifted to the Most High?

The incidents which led up to this cry of David are well known to all. This cry closes the history of Absalom, a history which commenced years before when Maacah, the daughter of King Talmai, bore David a little son. From the very day on which that son was born, David set great store by him, for he called him Absalom, Son of my Peace. Sad misnomer! Only a few years have rolled by, and we hear the same father who had taken the newborn babe in his arms and said, "His name shall be Absalom, Son of my Peace," repeating over and over again his cry of anguish, "O Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" Some men begin their lives with names and prayers of hope; but their history is concluded with a sob, a curse, a groan.

It would have been a searching lesson in retributive justice had Absalom been the son of Bathsheba, instead of Maacah. That would have appealed to us as altogether fitting. But instead of that, the good and the wise son was the fruit of his sinful union with Uriah's wife, and the son who brought him shame and anguish was a child born of

honorable union with Talmai's daughter. There is no logic in affection, and although he deserved less of David's love than all the other princes, Absalom had more than they all. In this handsome blackguard, there were traits of mind and body that won him affection wherever he went. No matter where he went, he "stole the people's hearts." When he had become a murderer, and fratricide, and had fled to Geshur to dwell with his mother's people, David mourned for his son every day. "In his heart there was the conflict between the instinct of justice and that of natural affection. Judgment said, 'Absalom, you have sinned; you have murdered your own brother; pay the penalty; remain in banishment.' But love said, 'Absalom, come home, come home! Without thee the feast is cheerless! Without thee, the halls are silent! Without thee, the lyre is tuneless! Without thee, how poor is the shining armour and mighty array of war! Other sons have I, but there is but one Absalom. Absalom, with thy faults and sins, with all thy pride and waywardness, come home!'"[1] "And the soul of King David longed to go forth unto Absalom!"

This last cry, then, at the end of Absalom's

[1] *Parables of the Old Testament*, Macartney.

stormy career, was not the first measure in the chorus of sorrow that he drew from David's heart. All through his life he had brought pain and sorrow and danger to David, and one might think that when David heard that he was dead, he would have breathed a sigh of relief. But instead of that, this is what we hear, this cry and sob which I have made bold to call a prayer.

In David's prayer over Absalom, we hear the petition of humanity to be with those whom it loves. In wishing that he had died for Absalom, David only voices the great longing of all who know how to love. Anguish may dictate such expressions as "Would to God I had died for thee!" but the real meaning is, "Would to God thou hadst not died!" for love finds it just as hard to leave the beloved as it is to have the beloved taken away. The first thing about this prayer, then, is that it expresses the natural grief of a father over the son whom he loved. In 1878, the Rev. Duncan C. Green, son of the Bishop of Mississippi, died at his post of duty during the prevalence of yellow fever. The father was a friend of Longfellow, and to him Longfellow sent his lines, "The Chamber Over The Gate," suggested by the lament of David:

"Is it so far from thee
Thou canst no longer see,
In the Chamber over the Gate,
That old man desolate,
Weeping and wailing sore
For his son, who is no more?
O Absalom, my son!

"Is it so long ago
That cry of human woe
From the walled city came,
Calling on his dear name,
That it has died away
In the distance of today?
O Absalom, my son!

"There is no far or near,
There is neither there nor here,
There is neither soon nor late,
In that Chamber over the Gate,
Nor any long ago
To that cry of human woe,
O Absalom, my son!

"From the ages that are past
The voice sounds like a blast,
Over seas that wreck and drown,
Over tumult of traffic and town;
And from ages yet to be
Come the echoes back to me,
O Absalom, my son!

"Somewhere at every hour
The watchman on the tower
Looks forth, and sees the fleet
Approach of the hurrying feet
Of messengers, that bear
The tidings of despair.
O Absalom, my son!

How true it is that

"There is no far or near,
There is neither there nor here,
There is neither soon nor late,
In that Chamber over the Gate,"

let those who have entered that chamber confess. This is not a Hebrew king long ages gone by that we hear praying, but the father, the mother, who lives near you in your town, or village, or city street. At every hour, at this very hour, somewhere the runners are approaching with hurrying feet and bearing the tidings of despair.

Love covers a multitude of sins. That is often interpreted in the sense that we ought to love one another because love covers transgression in the one who loves; it makes up for a great many shortcomings in character, as Jesus said of Mary, "She is forgiven much for she hath loved much." But very likely, when Peter spake of loving and how love covers a multitude of sins, he meant that

love will overlook and hide and cover the faults and sins of the one who is loved. It may be that he thought of his own bitter experience; he remembered his own coarse denial of Jesus in the same night in which He was betrayed, and how when he had denied Him thrice, Jesus turned and looked upon him. Peter felt terribly his own shame and guilt, but Jesus looked upon him in love, and love covered all his faults. It was so with David. Absalom had denied him, but when he heard that he was dead, the father's love covered all his faults. Great love always does that, for love hopeth all things and believeth all things. I recall now a very distinguished clergyman of another communion, who had a son, handsome and gifted like Absalom, but who, following his father into the ministry, brought reproach to the cause of Christ and immeasurable anguish to his father. The son was deposed from the ministry. Years afterwards the father appeared before the synod of the church and pleaded with his brethren to restore the son to the holy office. Those who were present describe the scene as the most moving and dramatic they had ever witnessed. The theologian, the wise counsellor, the man who took thought for the church, the guardian of the honor of the cause, all these were

gone, or, for the moment, they were sunk and the father only stood there pleading for his beloved son. O love, love of fathers for sons, love of frail creatures of the dust for passing shadows like themselves; love that wilt not let any go without a tear, a sigh, a lamentation, by thine ever burning flame thou dost teach us to read the noble characters which are writ large in human nature, and reading them to think more highly of ourselves and hope more firmly in God!

In David's prayer I think that I can hear a petition for forgiveness. David asking Absalom to forgive him? Yes. And why? Because David felt that he had not discharged his full duty towards this son. In this prayer there is the bitter minor chord of remorse. If a son of the best father in the world makes shipwreck of his life, it is inevitable that the mourning father should reproach himself with having left undone things that he might have done for that son. If that is so, then how much more bitter must have been the grief of David as he contemplates the wreck and ruin of this son Absalom, with whom he had been so lenient and careless. Of another of David's sons, the rebel Adonijah, it is recorded that "his father had not displeased him at any time, in saying,

'Why hast thou done so?'" Absalom had the same kind of training. He was left to do much as he pleased, and now when his pleasures have brought him to disaster and death, David feels a degree of responsibility for his untimely end. That is the thought that comes to me when I hear the echo of his prayer, "Would God I had died for thee!" Looking in the showcase of a bookstore not long ago, I saw a somewhat striking illustration of a son with a revolver in his hand, about to take his own life, and saying to his father that he had come to a place where death was the only open gate, because of his father's neglect and carelessness. The book was called "The Sins of the Fathers."

From his grave beneath the stone pile in Ephraim's wood, the mutilated Absalom called to his father with reproach and judgment, saying, "You might have saved me from this awful end; but you gave me nothing but kisses and caresses. You never told me that the way of the transgressor is hard, and that the eye that mocketh at his father and refuseth to obey his mother, the ravens shall pluck it out. A little less indulgence, a little less leniency with my faults, and I might have been saved from this lonely grave of guilt and shame."

But there was another element in the remorse of David. Whatever his failing with regard to the discipline and instruction of Absalom, in the judgment that had overtaken Absalom, David must have recognized the penalty of his own transgressions. What a nightmare his life had been since that fatal morning when he fell before the charms of Bathsheba! David's sin had been forgiven long ago, but the words of the prophet who announced that forgiveness, and yet said, "The sword shall never depart from thy house," had been terribly fulfilled. Murder, fratricide, incest, rebellion, all these had followed hard upon one another. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that also shall he reap." David sowed shame, appetite, lust, injustice, cruelty, murder, and one by one they all came back upon his head. But the sword! It is that sword which now pierces the heart of Israel's king when he hears that Absalom is dead, and cries, "Would God I had died for thee! O Absalom, thou shouldest be alive and thy father dead, for thou art punished not only for thine own sins, but for the sins of thy father. Would to God I had died for thee! Absalom, poor, beautiful, handsome, affectionate, wayward, misled and mistrained boy, lying there in your lonely grave, the

stones pressing hard upon thy flawless body, and the blood and dirt matting thy once glorious hair, if to thee in thy present state recollection is possible, and the soul is still able to forgive, then, O Absalom, forgive thine aged broken-hearted father, and still wilt thou be Absalom, the son of my peace!"

But there is yet a third petition that I hear in this cry that comes from the "Chamber Over The Gate." We have heard the prayer of love, that it be not separated from the beloved, and the prayer of forgiveness, David asking Absalom to forgive his criminal neglect and leniency. What is the third petition? It is the prayer of a father over a son who has died impenitent. Life teaches man to prepare to meet his God, and David knew that Absalom was not ready. It was hard enough that he had died in rebellion against his father, that he had no opportunity, perhaps no wish, to say to David, "Father, forgive me. I have sinned against thee. Ere I die, my father, kiss me and forgive me!" That would have made it far different with David. But Absalom's attitude towards David was only a reflection of his attitude towards God. He died as so many live and die, in rebellion against God and His Anointed. When David wishes that he

had died before Absalom, in his stead, I read this meaning into it: he would have had Absalom given a little longer day of grace and preparation for meeting God in the judgment.

This is one of the mysteries of our faith, namely, that we are wounded even where we believe. A man who believes in God, in Christ as the only Saviour of mankind, in the life to come and the judgment to come, will suffer from fears and anxieties which never trouble a godless and unbelieving man. When the son of such a man dies, there is natural grief, but not the grief that comes to the believing man, even though the grief be relieved by intermittent gleams of hope. The more highly any organ is developed, the greater its capacity for suffering. The ear of the trained musician will be disturbed by discords that never trouble the ordinary listener, and the trained writer and speaker will be offended in utterances which do not offend the ordinary hearer or reader. And the man upon whose soul has dawned the great hope of Christianity will be perplexed by fears and doubts which never visit the godless and unbelieving man.

The subject is painful, and for that reason many have made sentiment their religion, and defied or

denounced Christianity because in declaring a salvation for men, it clearly teaches that men may be lost. If men did not need a Saviour, then had Christ not died. This is revelation and common sense, and the man who subscribes to either, will suffer a nameless pain if one whom he has dearly loved dies impenitent, unreconciled to God. David knew that pain. Burning questions rise before us when we contemplate this mystery. How could we be happy and some be lost? Will not the love of God find some way of bringing all men at last, even though purged for a time with future punishments, to peace and eternal light? The answer belongs to God. To God also belongeth justice and righteousness. The Judge of all the earth will do right. When the redeemed gathered by the sea of glass mingled with fire, and thought of God's dealings with them, this was the song they sang:—"Great and marvellous are Thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are all Thy ways, Thou King of Saints. Who would not fear Thee and glorify Thy name, for Thou only art holy?"

VIII
THE PRAYER OF ELIJAH

VIII

THE PRAYER OF ELIJAH

"But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers."—I KINGS 19:4

Elijah was down, and almost out. He was one of those few men "of whom the world was not worthy." That such a man lived makes us rejoice in our common humanity. As eloquent Wendell Phillips said over the grave of John Brown, "Men will believe more firmly in virtue now that such a man has lived and died." Carmel itself was not more rugged and more majestic than that prophet when he stood upon the mountain peak, his face flushed with the splendid victory over the howling priests of Baal.

Yet Elijah was a man of like passions with us. The lark which has sung her song at the very gate of heaven, sinks at last, wearied and voiceless, into the brown furrow. The height of the crest of one wave measures the depth of the trough of the next.

The next time we see Elijah, he is lying beneath a juniper tree of the desert, asking God to take away his life. After his victory over the priests of Baal, Elijah, strong in his success, girded up his loins and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. There his enthusiasm suddenly left him; for there met him a messenger from Jezebel threatening him with death on the morrow: "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." As a prophet of Jehovah in the exercise of his duties and his commissions, Elijah was attended by the power and majesty of God; but as a man, he was alone, feeble, and helpless. He had to save his own life as any other man pursued by the wrath of a wicked queen. He arose and "went for his life," and came to Beer-sheba, at the extreme south of the country. There he left his servant and plunged into the wilderness another day's journey. In that same wilderness where Hagar and Ishmael had wandered in their exile, Elijah held his course until the blinding heat of the desert smote him to his knees and made him seek the shade of a lone juniper tree. Not even Hagar, weeping for her son, dying of thirst beneath the shrub, was more disconsolate and wretched than

Elijah as he lay beneath the juniper tree, praying for the peace of death: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers."

The juniper tree is one with which most of us have at least a passing acquaintanceship. We do not need to be prophets of God, pursued by a wicked queen, before we find ourselves beneath this shrub of the desert, our face just as deep in the sand as Elijah's, and our cry just as feeble and as hopeless. As we rest, then, for a little under the shade of this friendly tree of the desert, we shall find that as we study the cause and the cure of Elijah's despondency, we are considering our own melancholy and discouragement—its cause, its cure and its sacred blessing.

This is the day in which we hear much about the influence of the mind over the body. But Elijah was one of those old-fashioned persons who preach an old gospel of the body's power over the mind. The first and most obvious cause of Elijah's dejection is his physical condition. After his race with the chariot of Ahab into Jezreel, enough to prostrate an ordinary prophet or man, Elijah had fled for his life, a hundred miles and more, to the desert of Beer-sheba. No wonder that he sat

down beneath a juniper tree and asked for death. It was the body more than the spirit that longed for death and its rest. Very often the seat of our trouble is the body and not the mind. We have driven the body from Samaria clear to Beer-sheba, and when the water is spent in the bottle, and the body collapses under the juniper tree, the mind and the spirit fall with the body, and the whole man goes down in the general collapse. It is a fair sight to see the spirit rise above the weakness of the flesh; to see a heavenly disposition give beauty to a marred face, and to behold the soul struggling to free herself from the house of clay. This makes us believe that God is a reality and that love is immortal. Yet none of us dares scorn the close fellowship of body and of spirit, and we owe it to our souls to keep the body in repair. That Elijah's distress was in part due to the body, we know from the remedy applied. He lay down and slept. God gave His beloved sleep. Before He gave him the vision of His glory and new prophecies to utter, He refreshed him with sleep. That night's sleep in the desert's solitude did for Elijah what it has done for all weary and worn and discouraged souls; what it did for Peter in the dungeon and for Jesus on the lake of Galilee: it

charmed his care and healed his spirit. For so He giveth His beloved sleep.

> "Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
> The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
> Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
> Chief nourisher in life's feast."

Another cause of Elijah's dejection was a sense of failure and a feeling of loneliness. He had reason to think that he had failed and to feel that he was forsaken. This is the meaning of his cry, "It is enough; take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." Only a few days before, Elijah must have thought that he *was* better than his fathers. For God had worked great miracles through him. He had prayed and it rained not. He prayed again and the heaven gave rain and the earth brought forth her fruit. He had been granted a wonderful victory over the prophets of Baal. He thought that he had overthrown idolatry and converted all Israel. But the same day he must flee out of the country. After all his work, he must confess that he is no better than his fathers; than Samuel and Nathan and David, and all the men of God who had striven for the worship of Jehovah. In the lives of the great men who have toiled for the true and lasting great-

ness of righteousness in themselves and in their fellows, we hear very often this note of defeat and failure. "The characteristic of waning life," writes Dean Farrar, "is disenchantment, a sense of inexorable weariness, a sense of inevitable disappointment. We trace it in Elijah, and John the Baptist; we trace it in Marcus Aurelius; we trace it in Francis of Assisi, we trace it in Roger Bacon; we trace it in Luther. All in vain. We have lived, humanly speaking, to little or no purpose. We are not better than our fathers. Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" They thought that they had failed, but this was because the desert and the juniper tree was a poor place for vision.

In our lives, the sense of failure often weighs heavily upon us. We have striven hard, but the end is not in sight. We have battled hard with the besetting sin, but it always comes back to vex us again. Or we grow discouraged in our work for God and the truth. The world is handed over to thieves and rascals; the church is without life and zeal, and the Cross of Jesus seems to have lost its power. When we are in that frame of mind we need the cure of Elijah. God first of all told him to get to his work. "What doest thou here,

Elijah?" Elijah made some reply about his former zeal for Jehovah, but this inquiry of God touched his pride and brought back his old faith. Other men might go into the desert and bewail the evil of the times, but God almost wonders that Elijah would be found thus engaged. "What doest THOU here, Elijah?" Are there no idolaters left in Israel, no sins of kings to rebuke, that you have retired to this desert where only the beasts can hear your voice? The best cure for Elijah was a summons to work for God, to anoint Jehu king over Israel and Hazael king over Syria. And the best cure for us when we find ourselves beneath the juniper tree, is to take up once more the task we have deserted, present a solid front to sin, and with prayer and patience work out our own salvation. As we work, we need to remember that it is God's battle and God's world. It was foolish presumption for Elijah to despair of the world as if it were his own, and would fall the moment he ceased to support it. God very gently taught him this when He told him to anoint Elisha, a nameless plowboy, in his stead. Elijah had done a mighty work, and God could use him in the world. But God's work in the world depended upon neither Elijah nor Elisha, for "God doth

not need either man's work or his own gifts. Who best bear his mild yoke, they serve him best."

John Keble used to say, "When you are quite despondent, the best way is to go out and do something kind to somebody." This is a medicine that never fails to cure. To test it, try it. Your visit to the sick, the bereaved, the disheartened and the lonely, will kindle fires of love and hope upon your own desolate hearth. Christ was faithful and cheerful, and one reason was that He "went about doing good." Imprison yourself with your sorrow, and life will be a gloomy bondage.

The last thing that anyone should do is to form opinions of life, of God, of self, and especially of one's fellowmen at these moments of depression. Mariners wait for the stars and the sun to reappear before they take their reckoning. Tyndale tells how he suffered from melancholy due to an oppression in his chest. Then all seemed dark and dismal. But he was very careful, he said, to discard any opinions he might have formed during that period of depression. There may come moods of depression for which there is no human accounting. It is the pathos of the human soul. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" asked the Psalmist of his soul, for he was not able to locate

the seat of his disheartenment. Such moments may come to all. When they do come, remember that this is part of our earthly trial and probation. Even Jesus drank the same cup. Whether it leaves us or not, in the midst of our trial, we can play the man and the Christian. The last sentence in the last letter of heroic Martin Luther reads thus: "Wait on the Lord."

Elijah felt himself forsaken. Loneliness brings despair. Sages have found charms in the face of solitudes, but none in the face of loneliness. He thought that he was sole worshiper of God in Israel, and that even God had forsaken him. Here he drank of that bitter cup which has been pressed to the lips of God's greatest servants: Lonely Luther, in his old age, feeling that his work had been in vain, and seeking for death. Lonely Job, clinging to his faith in God, yet sick and desolate on his ash heap. Lonely David, who once sang "The Lord is my shepherd" now crying, "Why art thou far from helping me?" Lonely Paul in his dungeon: "All they of Asia have turned from me. Only Luke is with me." Lonely John the Baptist, the second Elijah, forsaken in his dungeon by the Dead Sea, and sending to Jesus, Whom he had hailed as the Lamb of God, his message of

doubt, "Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another?" Lonely Jesus on his Cross, about the ninth hour crying out, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" These all went down into the valley of this shadow of loneliness. Yet God had not forsaken them, although for a moment He had hid His face from them. After telling His disciples that they would forsake Him, Jesus said, "And yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me." When Christian was passing through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, he thought he heard the voice of a man before him saying, "Though I walk through the valley, I will fear no evil." Then Christian was glad, for he knew that there were others who feared God in the same valley. Elijah thought that he was alone; but God showed him that he had seven thousand companions, men who had not bowed the knee to Baal. It matters not how dark our valley, how sore our trial, others are in the same valley. And even if there were none with you, you are not alone, for the Father is with you.

Elijah knew much of God before he went into that desert. But there he learned more of God. He saw attributes of God that he had never seen before. He had known the God of majesty, the

God of thunder and thick cloud, shaking the earth with His wonders. But now he was to learn something of God's love and gentleness. He was to find out that "even as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him." This was the God who knew that Elijah was dust and remembered his frame; a God who gave His beloved sleep and spread for him a table in the wilderness. The rocks were rent with the wind; but God was not in the wind. The earth trembled, but God was not in the earthquake. The mountain burned with the fire, but God was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice. God at times speaks in the fire and the whirlwind, and now, as then, it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hand of the Living God, for our God is a consuming fire. But God speaks in other accents, in the still small voice, even as a mother stills her child. You know and admire some friend; are pleased with his humor, attracted by his intelligence. You have long acquaintanceship with him, and think that you know him well. But one day there comes the shadow of sorrow or of sickness. That friend comes to you and reveals himself in a new light, and you see a gentleness and a sympathy and a nobility there you never saw before. So God is

best seen in the shadow. Beneath the juniper tree He reveals Himself to you as the loving Father and God. The night had to fall before these stars could shine. Rise, then, from under this juniper tree of sorrow, or sin, or discouragement, and with new strength and new hope, go on your way. We are not alone, for Jesus, who is touched with a feeling of our infirmities, is at our side. If we but wait upon our God, He will put a new song in our mouth, and with God's help, we shall go forward into life, ever ready to display, like that storm-tossed Ulysses of whom Homer and Tennyson sang,

> "One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will.
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

I reflect upon what I have just been saying about the still small voice, and conclude that although it is true that God has His ministries of gentleness, and that as in nature the great storms and convulsions do less to change the face of the earth than the gentle lapping of the waves and the gentle salutation of the winds and the rains, so in the moral world, the still small voice of love and kindness may effectuate greater things than the dis-

play of wrath and judgment. All this is true. But I am not sure that Elijah felt all that we now read into the narrative. To him I think the still small voice was the voice that let him know again that there was a God and that God had not forsaken him or his people. Have we not all heard it, that still small voice? Have we not been drifting, drifting, losing our hold upon great realities of life and work, and then all was saved again because we heard God speak? We knew once more that God is, and that He is love, that He is wisdom, that He is Father and Redeemer. Yes, thanks be unto God, Elijah, mantle-wrapped at the mouth of the cavern on Horeb's rugged top, was not the only servant of God, not the only believer, who has heard that voice. After winds of passion have rent us, after earthquakes of sorrow have shaken us, after fires of pain and judgment have burned us, when the skies seemed brass and God not to be, or, if existing, then a heartless tyrant, we have caught once more the blessed accents of His voice and the joy and strength of life came back to us. When the storms come upon you, when the heat of life's monotony oppresses you, when fires unholy kindle within you, then ask God to speak. "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth!"

"Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!"

When John Knox lay dying in his house in Edinburgh, weary of his long, hard battle, he said, "I heartily salute and take my goodnight of all the faithful of both realms earnestly desiring the assistance of their prayers, that without any notable slander to the evangel of Jesus Christ, I may end my battle, for as the world is weary of me, so am I of it." I do not mean that from this valedictory of Knox we are to conclude that his faith in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ had suffered eclipse. No, not that. But the old man is weary of the hard warfare, and longs for his discharge, realizing that the battle is the Lord's, and that He has seven thousand other prophets and agencies through which he can work His sovereign will. Elijah must have realized that when he cast his prophetic garment about the shoulders of Elisha. God never quits the field. Frederick William Faber's grand hymn well sums up the faith and assurance which are the privilege of all those who put their trust in the God of Elijah:

"O, it is hard to work for God,
To rise and take His part
Upon this battle-field of earth,
And not sometimes lose heart!

"He hides Himself so wondrously,
As though there were no God;
He is least seen when all the powers
Of ill are most abroad.

"Or He deserts us at the hour
The fight is all but lost;
And seems to leave us to ourselves
Just when we need Him most.

"Ill masters good, good seems to change
To ill with greatest ease;
And, worst of all, the good with good
Is at cross-purposes.

"Ah! God is other than we think;
His ways are far above,
Far beyond reason's height, and reached
Only by childlike love.

"Workman of God, O, lose not heart,
But learn what God is like;
And in the darkest battle-field
Thou shalt know where to strike.

"Thrice blest is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when He
Is most invisible.

"Blest too is he who can divine
Where real right doth lie,
And dares to take the side that seems
Wrong to man's blindfold eye.

"For right is right, since God is God;
And right the day must win;
To doubt would be disloyalty,
To falter would be sin."

IX

THE PRAYER OF ELISHA

IX

THE PRAYER OF ELISHA

"Lord, open his eyes that he may see."—II KING 6:17

"Great outbursts of the miraculous," writes Canon Liddon, "attesting God's energetic presence at particular times in particular places, appear to recur in the sacred history in cycles, when truth has to be announced—when it has to be promulgated afresh—when it has to be saved from extinction." The miracles which mark the life of Elijah and Elisha belong to the third cycle, for the true religion in Israel was in danger of extinction, her own court gone over to idolatry and the national life threatened by foreign invasion. The king of Syria made numerous incursions into the country and the chief object of his expeditions was to capture the king of Israel and take his army. But whenever he made the effort, no matter how carefully he made his plans, his quarry always escaped him. This happened so often that Benhadad began to suspect treachery in his own ranks. "Will ye not show me which of us is for the king

of Israel?" And one of his servants said, "None my lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bed-chamber." Good men are walls of defense to the state. They are the safety of any community, for they represent the Lord. "Except the Lord keep the city the watchman waketh but in vain." It was not the skill and vigilance of the king of Israel and his armed men and counselors that saved him from the hand of Syria, but the warnings that came from the man of God, Elisha.

His spies had brought word to Benhadad that Elisha was in Dothan. Gathering his army, a great host, he made a forced march by night and drew his lines about the city, confident that there could be no escape this time. The servant of Elisha, a young man, rose early that morning, and as he looked out from the wall of the city, he was terrified at what he saw, the hosts of Syria, chariots, horse and foot, stretched in formidable lines around the city walls. He hurried back to his master and rousing him cried out, "Alas, my master! how shall we do?" Elisha answered him, "Fear not; for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." The young man must

have thought that Elisha was mocking him, that he had gone mad. But before he could voice his amazement, Elisha prayed for him, "Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see." And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

In this answered prayer we have a definition of faith. The New Testament writer defined faith to be "the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen." This young man had the evidence of things not seen. His natural eyesight was good, for he was in the prime of his youthful vigor. But until the Lord opened his eyes he saw nothing and feared everything. Because faith is the evidence of things not seen, men have said that faith is only imagination. There is such a thing as natural imagination. We say that he or she imagines such and such a thing, and the enterprises of imagination are ofttimes very interesting. But imagination sees the things that are not; faith sees the things that are. Nor is faith the final step in logic and reasoning, the clearing away of difficulties and arriving at the truth. By wisdom and by argument the soul does not know God. Reason can support faith; it can

infer, and defend and support, but it is not faith itself, for many great minds have been great in their unbelief. It is with the heart that man believeth unto righteousness.

How did this young man come to see? Because Elisha argued with him about the past history of his life, and how God had delivered men out of a worse situation? Because he reasoned with him about the reality of God and the spiritual hosts, although the natural eye could not see them? Because he wanted to see a sight that would offset the dismay caused by the far flung battle line of the Syrians? No. The young man saw the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha, only because the Lord had opened his eyes. Whereas he was blind, now he sees. That is faith. In the dawning of faith, in the opening of the eyes, the mightiest helper is prayer. "Behold he prayeth," said the Lord to Ananias when Paul was in the house in Damascus, and it was after his prayer that the scales fell from his eyes. But does not a man need to have faith before he can even pray? Is it not then a contradiction in terms to speak of praying for faith? No; it is not. This young man believed in God, but he needed to have faith that God in this emergency

would care for him and deliver him. There is always a portion of untaken and unconquered territory in the faith of the oldest believer, and always the prayer of the epileptic's father is appropriate to our lips—"Lord I believe, help Thou mine unbelief." Elisha prayed for the young man. Perhaps our prayers will do more for the companion, the friend, the stranger, in bringing him to believe in Christ than our teaching and our reasoning. Is some friend treading a path of danger and shame? Then pray Elisha's prayer, "Lord, open his eyes that he may see." Is some one walking the path of unkindness or ingratitude or thoughtlessness? Then pray for him, "Lord, open his eyes that he may see!" Is some one doing you an injury or an injustice? Then pray for him that the Lord would open his eyes. Is some one living regardless of the life and death of Jesus Christ? Then pray for him, "Lord, open his eyes that he may see—see himself a lost sinner, see Christ as the One who loved him and gave Himself to die for him."

Faith gives courage. That roll call of Hebrew heroes in the Letter to the Hebrews, telling what men did and endured through faith, informs us of the animating power of faith. Nothing is said

here, but we take it for granted that the young man's fears were allayed when he saw the mountain filled with horses and chariots of fire. He understood now what Elisha meant when he said, "They that be with us are more than they that be with them." This vision of the mountain aflame with fiery horses and chariots, has not that been the secret of great enduring and great hoping and great achieving by men and women of God from Elisha's day to this? When others could see only the chariots and horsemen of the beleaguering Syrians, they saw the hosts of God. They feared not the arm of flesh for they knew that with them was the Lord of Hosts.

"There are, who, like the seer of old,
Can see the helpers God has sent,
And how life's rugged mountain-side
Is white with many an angel tent!

"They hear the heralds whom our Lord
Sends down His pathway to prepare;
And light, from others hidden, shines
On their high place of faith and prayer.

"Let such for earth's despairing ones,
Hopeless, yet longing to be free,
Breathe once again the prophet's prayer;
'Lord, open their eyes, that they may see!'"

"Lord, how shall we do?" is the fear of our hearts when the hosts of evil press about the citadel of the world. "Where is now thy God?" they say, and God-fearing folk are almost afraid to answer. Lord, open our eyes that we may see. Open our eyes so that we shall see other forces than the physical armaments of the nations of the earth. Open our eyes that we may see the hosts of God, the symbols of a government that is above the government of man, and by whose authority alone the government of man stands. Open our eyes that we may see how with Thee a thousand years are as one day, that though Thou dost not hasten Thy steps, neither dost Thou ever turn back. Thy King and Thy Kingdom will come at that hour which Thou hast appointed for Him. Open our eyes that we may see God as well as man, and learn that "Time's drama, world rising behind world, universe behind universe, is His drama; its theatre this far-outspanned fabric of star-drift and suns, of fire cloud and sun systems blackening in ether; and here, on this planet, great nations, cities, empires are the brief embodiments or the transient realization of His desires."

When the young man's eyes were opened, he saw that they that were with Elisha were more

than they that were with the Syrians. What did he see? Horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. Is that a symbol of divine protection and power? Yes, for fire, the most ethereal of things, is often used in the Bible to symbolize the Deity. But the narrative reminds us also that there are other worlds than our world and other beings than those we see housed in clay. The Bible always takes these worlds and these heavenly beings for granted. It announces their appearance and their ministry as calmly as it tells of the meeting between man and man. "If we had not become," writes Phillips Brooks, "such Sadducees in our disbelief of spiritual existence, we should not find it hard to believe that it was neither of these—flesh and blood warriors or mere ideas and visions—but that with his newly-opened eyes he did indeed see beings of some higher spiritual order, who are always busy about this world of ours, only not visible to the dull senses of our ordinary life. There is no doubt of what the Bible teaches, and it is what the human heart, taught by God through its own deepest instincts, has always guessed at and believed, that this world of fleshly life is not all, that everywhere there is a realm of spiritual life close to us, and that there is an

inner sense to which, when it is awakened, these spiritual beings have often been actually visible, and given words of cheer and guidance and encouragement to toiling and discouraged men."

I know that we touch now upon the borderland of a great but dangerous coast. We cannot doubt that multitudes have been deluded and deceived by their own disordered imagination. Yet it is altogether reasonable that these spiritual hosts still go forth to do the will of God, nor does it seem that their ministry for us would be altogether unnecessary even if we do possess what they of ancient days did not possess, the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the promise of His constant presence, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." In that beautiful passage in Paradise Lost, Book IV., where Adam explains to Eve the world in which they live, his companion asks him about the stars in heaven, wondering for whom they shine—

"But wherefore all night long shine these? For whom
This glorious sight, when sleep hath shut all eyes?
To whom our general ancestor replies:

"These, then, though unbeheld in deep of night,
Shine not in vain; nor think, though men were none,
That Heaven would want spectators, God want praise.

Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth
Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep;
All these with ceaseless praise His works behold
Both day and night. How often, from the steep
Of echoing hill, or thicket, have we heard
Celestial voices, to the midnight air,
Sole, or responsive each to other's note,
Singing their great Creator! Oft in bands
While they keep watch, or nightly rounding walk,
With heavenly touch of instrumental sounds
In full harmonic number joined, their songs
Divide the night, and lift our thoughts to heaven."

In these lines Milton gives it as his belief that man, in his unfallen state, had easy and natural intercourse with the spiritual world, and that, were he restored to his original state, sin banished from his life, he would again hear their voices and have his thoughts lifted to Heaven. The Christian Church in the letter to the Hebrews is defined in terms which belong both to this world and the next, to time and eternity, "We are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant." The com-

munion, then, to which the Christian belongs, numbers among its hosts spiritual beings, the "innumerable company of angels." We must think of them when we do our work for God. They compass us about; they lead us on and cheer us, and even our weakest blows may have a might of which we little dream because the invisible hosts have helped us and have taken our labors and our prayers and made them effectual to do the will of God.

X

THE PRAYER OF HEZEKIAH

X

THE PRAYER OF HEZEKIAH

"O Lord, by these things men live."—Isaiah 38:16

In one of our bookstores, looking for a New Year greeting card, I picked up a card with this wish printed on it: "May the New Year bring to you nothing but laughter and sunshine." I gathered up some of the cards, intending to purchase them; but upon second thought, I left them and chose others. Could I really wish for my friends that the year would bring to them nothing but sunshine and laughter? I felt that I could not, that I ought not to make such a wish, either for myself or for my friends. It takes more than sunshine and laughter to produce strong and useful lives. The cloud and the rainfall must play their part. A friend who has passed through extraordinary suffering said to me recently, "Suffering has its compensations." What did she mean? She meant that her bodily pains and her near approach unto the gates of death had left behind them spiritual deposits of inestimable wealth. It was this

same truth that Hezekiah wished to express when he said in his prayer and song, "By these things men live."

By what things? The things through which Hezekiah had just been passing. No man wants to die at thirty-nine, or at forty-nine, sixty-nine, or seventy-nine—

> "For whatever crazy sorrow saith,
> No life that breathes with human breath,
> Hath ever truly longed for death."

Hezekiah was thirty-nine and "had everything to live for." He had devoted his talents and his energy to the reformation of the religion and morals of Israel. The temple had been repaired and its worship purified. The groves and the images had been cut down and the brazen serpent of Moses, once a means of health and saving, but now become an object of superstitious worship, suffering thus the fate of many religious rites and symbols, he destroyed. In the midst of his reforms and his restoration of the prestige of his kingdom, Jerusalem was threatened by an invasion of Sennacherib, king of Assyria. When it seemed that Jerusalem must fall and the national life be destroyed, God delivered Israel with a great deliverance. The Angel of the Lord, with plague and

pestilence in his hand, smote the host of Sennacherib—

"Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

"For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed.
And the eyes of the sleepers wax'd deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still."

We can imagine the sentiments of Hezekiah and his people when they learned of the great deliverance, how the capital would ring with exultation and the temple would smoke with the offerings of thanksgiving.

In the midst of this celebration the king was stricken with a sickness which had about it the mark of death. It may be that he had not given God the glory, or that his people were praising their God less than their king. "In those days," the days of victory and national thanksgiving, Hezekiah was sick unto death. If he had any doubts in his own mind about the issue of his illness, those doubts were dissipated by the blunt words of his friend and contemporary, Isaiah, who

came to him and said, "Thus saith the Lord: Set thy house in order; for thou shalt die and not live." Hezekiah was heart-broken at this intelligence. In the first place, the life after death had not been illumined by the revelation in Jesus: life and immortality had not been brought to life. It was a gloomy prospect even for the most devout. In the second place, even a Christian believer, at that age, with that position, in the midst of years and honors, would not wish to die. Hezekiah wept sore and prayed to God to spare his life. Many a better man than Hezekiah has prayed just as earnestly and the progress of his disease has not been stayed. But if we want to live, that ought not to keep us from praying for ourselves and for others. Who knoweth but that the Lord will be gracious? It pleased Him to grant the request of Hezekiah. "I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years." With the weakness of the sick, Hezekiah asked for a sign and God gave him the sign of the shadow on the dial. From his sick bed the weary monarch could see in the courtyard the step dial of his father, Ahaz, a series of steps with the pillar at the top, and as the sun declined, the shadow of the pillar crept down the steps. Isaiah gave him

his choice. "Shall the shadow go forward ten steps or back ten steps?" Hezekiah did just what we all would have done if we had been in his place: he asked that the shadow go back ten steps. It was an easy thing for the shadow to slip forward ten steps; there soon it was bound to go, and as it came nearer and nearer, it seemed to the sick monarch the very finger of death. "Nay, but let the shadow return backward ten steps. Then can I believe that fifteen years shall be added to my life." And when Isaiah cried unto the Lord, He who set the sun in heaven brought the shadow back ten steps. With the returning shadow the tide of life came back into the veins of Hezekiah and he was healed of his sickness. God healed him, but God used the common sense and skill of the physicians: "when the poultice of figs was laid on the diseased part the king was healed." To call the doctor is just as much an act of faith in God as to get down on your knees and pray. God gave man the earth and all the healing medicines that are in it, and God endowed man with judgment and the power to choose and apply. When you put your faith in your doctor, therefore, you put your faith in God.

During the days of convalescence, the king

thinks of the bitter experience through which he has just passed. He kept a log, as it were, of his stormy voyage up to the very gates of death. For his own future reference, and for the instruction of his fellowmen who should come after him and have a like experience, Hezekiah wrote down in a song of deliverance all that he had felt and the lessons which he now draws from his encounter with death. He sums it all up by saying, "By these things men live." "I have suffered pain, loss, the fear of death, the separation from light and love. But these are the very things by which men live. I used to think that these were the things by which men die. I used to think that affliction and sorrow and adversity took away all meaning from life. But now I see that they are the things which teach me what life really is. By these things men live."

By adversity man is introduced to a higher form of existence. He learns of life temporal and life everlasting. I am not speaking for the benefit of just a few persons. The most pitiable of human beings is that miserable creature who goes through life imagining that he, in point of adversity, is an exception, and that other men are not tried as he is. Life spells a conflict, and all who live suffer

adversity in one form or another. The one whom you may envy and think wholly free from the chastening hand of God may be wearing, like Samaria's king, sackcloth within. Because of the common lot of man, then, this observation of Hezekiah is of universal application.

Pain, sickness, sorrow, weakness, defeat, overthrow, all these are stern schoolmasters which give us the real meaning of life. At thirty-nine this king was strong, hopeful, and it never dawned upon him what a weak thing this physical life is and how in a moment we can be brought low. Now he knew that, in the way that we truly learn, that is, experimentally. Hezekiah thought that life was made up of ivory palaces and shining temples and victorious armies, a hundred and ninety thousand dead Assyrians on the plain at morning, the treasures of silver and gold, the soft clothing of kings. But now he has another idea of life. The imminent approach of death had let him see that if this was life, he might in a moment be stripped of everything. He felt that he did not live in a palace which might withstand a siege, but in a shepherd's tent. "My dwelling is removed and carried away from me as a shepherd's tent." Or, he was like the piece of cloth finished in the

loom and cut by the shears of time. "I have rolled up like a weaver my loom. He will cut me off from the loom." It was at first a fearful sensation, the brevity, the unreality, the transitoriness of mortal existence. But afterwards it gave him a new idea of life. He had come closer to God. He thought less of gold and silver and armies and palaces and more of love, faith, repentance, forgiveness, of God.

The Hindu poet, Taggore, has a passage in which he hints at the danger of identifying life with substance, with things: "I am ever busy building this wall all around; as this wall goes up into the sky day by day, I lose sight of my true being in its dark shadow. I take pride in this great wall, and I plaster it with dust and sand lest a least hole should be left in this name; and for all the care I take I lose sight of my true being." You and I get so engrossed in building our wall of earthly desires and things and substance that we forget that this is not our life at all. When God brings the wall down with a crash, and the dust of it goes up to the sky, then we are taught what life is and how to live. Most of us have lived long enough to confirm all that Hezekiah has to say on this subject. When you lay as helpless as on

the day you were born; when the huge wall of your pride and trust had come down with a roar; or when the sense of sin and guilt hung about your neck as a millstone; when you had been brought to the very gates of Sheol, and it seemed that you could never be brought back; when you sat desolate and alone with a sense of loss and bereavement that words can never describe, did you not come back from that experience with a different idea of life? How poor and wretched seemed dollars and dust and raiment, rank and place and fame and pride! How real to you seemed love, friendship, faith, hope and God! As the rivers are at the flood tide filled with the fullness of the ocean, so into the little river of your present life in time there came with a song, sweet though in sadness, the quieting, healing, subduing sense of the divine and the eternal. You may have fallen away again, but for a time at least, was it not harder for you to be uncharitable, to be inconsiderate, to be harsh in creed or in deed, to be impure in thought or in word, to mind only things of this world? Your adversity flashed before you a new vision of life, whether you have been obedient to it or no. That was the way Jacob felt. The struggle at midnight had hurt him

and left its visible scar on his person. But he had seen the Lord. The old grasping supplanter disappears and his place is taken by Israel the Prince of God. And he called that place Peniel, "for I have seen God face to face."

That was the way Job felt. His sons, his daughters, his flocks, his herds, his health and his friends in quick succession were taken from him; blow after blow, wave after wave. But when he was through with it all, Job has something that more than replaced all that he had lost—he had a new idea of life and a new knowledge of God. "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee: wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." That was the way David felt. In the day of his adversity he cried out in his distress, "O God, my soul is cast down within me. All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." But afterwards he said, "It was for my good that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes. The law of my mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver." That was the way Hezekiah felt. At the time of his trouble, it seemed that he was to be cut off from the light, that the pit was to close forever on him, "I did mourn and chatter as a crane or swallow; mine

eyes fail with looking up." But when it was past he said, "O Lord, by these things men live. Behold, it was for my peace that I had great bitterness."

"Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three-parts pain!
Strive and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!"

I know of no writer who has dealt so tenderly and in so helpful a manner with the misfortunes of men as St. Pierre, the author of the immortal "Paul and Virginia." He had chosen for his motto the line from Virgil, "Taught by calamity, I pity the unhappy." In the "Indian Cottage" he not only comments on the spiritual gain from his own misfortunes, but throws out this exquisite suggestion for all who may need it, "Misfortune resembles the Black Mountain of Bember, situated at the extremity of the burning kingdom of Lahore; while you are climbing it, you see only before you barren rocks; but when you have reached its summit, you see heaven above your head, and at your feet the kingdom of Cashmere."

By the discipline of adversity we learn sympathy,

and sympathy leads to usefulness. Untempered steel is of little service, and so with the untempered life. Forbidden trees and subtle temptations we behold confronting man in the garden of innocence, for the strength of man comes only out of trial. I saw recently on one of the ivy tablets about College Hall at the University of Pennsylvania, the class motto, the familiar Horation maxim, "Non palma sine pulvere," "No palm without the dust." No true honor without the struggle in life's arena; no crown without the cross. The highest crown of life is usefulness. Adversity teaches men to be useful. It gives them patience, dignity of spirit, and a power to help.

This king after his day of trial said that he would go in "solemn procession" all the days of his life. It is a picture of a measured, steady tread through the streets of life. Not the creeping of the infant, nor the leaping of the youth, nor the hobble of age; but the measured tread of strength and conquest. They who have come up out of tribulation, by their sympathy and by their power gained in the fire, all their mean selfishness sloughed off, teach the rest of us how to live. In the words of George Adam Smith, "Sorrow's subjects, they are our kings; wrestlers with death, our veterans; and to

the rabble armies of society they set the step of a noble life." The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ taught the world that in all their afflictions He was afflicted. Who is this that cometh out of Edom? With garments dyed red from Bozrah? Whence cometh the calm, the dignity, the power to deliver, the power to comfort, even as a mother comforteth her child, that we behold in Jesus Christ? Out of the furnace of His own adversity, for He learned obedience for Himself and for us, through the things which He suffered. And we, His disciples, shall become the ministers of His comfort, when we have earned to turn to spiritual account our days of adversity.

There is a sad sequel to this story about Hezekiah. After he was well and strong once more, he forgot the vow that he had made with himself and with God to live his life in a new way and set before himself new ideals and standards of life. The king of Babylon, hearing of his recovery and the overthrow of the Assyrians, sent messengers and a present, ostensibly to congratulate him upon his recovery, but really to lead him into an alliance with Babylon. You might think that Hezekiah would have told them all about the shadow on the dial and how God spared his life;

and how he had come up out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death with new thoughts about life, old values discarded and new values established. But what did he do? He showed them the house of his precious things, the silver and the gold, and the spices and the precious oil, and "all the house of his armour; and all that was found in his treasures." The ambassadors had hardly gone when the ambassador of God, Isaiah, came to him, and said, "Behold the days are coming when all that is in thy house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon."

O, what a creature is man! It will be easy for you to sing your song and make your vows when the memory of the flame is still in the flesh and the sound of the wave is yet in your ear. But it will be harder for you to live your life according to the light that then dawned upon you. It will be harder for you to keep untarnished in life the spoils that you have gleaned from the fields of adversity. Will God speak to you in vain? Will He chasten, but not soften you? Will the sight of your old treasures, the presence of your old joys, the coming back of your old health, the recovery of what seemed to be lost make you forget His ways and

forget what Moses and Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God?"

Few of us would have the courage to make such a prayer, but we readily see what Robert Louis Stevenson meant in his lines, "The Celestial Surgeon," where he asks God to send him pain and suffering, if all the blessings of life have not wakened his spirit to sympathy and usefulness.

"If I have faltered more or less
In my great task of happiness;
If I have moved among my race
And shown no glorious morning face;
If beams from happy human eyes
Have moved me not; if morning skies,
Books, and my food, and summer rain
Knocked on my sullen heart in vain:—
Lord, Thy most pointed pleasure take
And stab my spirit broad awake;
Or, Lord, if too obdurate I,
Choose Thou, before that spirit die,
A piercing pain, a killing sin,
And to my dead heart run them in!"

XI

THE PRAYER OF JEREMIAH

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THE PRAYER OF JEREMIAH

"Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men, that I might leave my people, and go from them! For they be all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men."—JEREMIAH 9:2

Jeremiah has been called a figure of bronze dissolving in tears. No character in the Old Testament exhibits greater strength and fearlessness. He was a fortified city, an iron tower and a brazen wall against the whole land. Yet there are times when the man of iron and bronze is dissolved in tears and pity. This is one of those moments. "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people and go from them!" The righteous soul of Jeremiah was vexed because of the sins of his people. His mission was a hopeless and cheerless one. Israel's cup of iniquity was full and Jeremiah was to announce the coming of judgment. He was not even

to pray for his people or make intercession for them. He could do nothing to stay the tempest; it was his to stand upon the housetop and hail the swift approach of desolation and captivity. When the Chaldean armies were at the gates of the holy city, he had to conquer his pride and his patriotism and prophesy their victory. His fellow countrymen distrusted him and openly charged him with treason. It was little wonder that he sometimes fell beneath this burden of public opprobrium and even, like Job, cursed the day that he was born. "Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying, a man-child is born unto thee, making him very glad!" Jeremiah felt the loneliness of Lot that righteous man in a world of sin; the loneliness of Elijah when he felt that his burden was greater than he could bear, and with his face in the sand beneath the juniper tree, cried, "It is enough. Now O Lord, take away my life"; the loneliness of John the Baptist, when in the dungeon of Herod and his eagle eye filming with doubt, he sent the message to Jesus, "Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another?"; the loneliness of Jesus when prostrate in the Garden, He prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." It was in

such an hour as this that Jeremiah wished for a lodging place in the desert, where he should never even hear of his people again.

It was not very long before Jeremiah had the opportunity to gratify this longing of the heart. But the strange thing is that when that chance came, the lonely prophet chose to remain with the people he served and in the land he loved. Jerusalem had fallen and Zedekiah's eyes had been burned out and his royal sons slain before his face. But to Jeremiah Nebuchadnezzar showed great kindness. He told him that he might go down into Babylon with him and there be treated with every honor and every consideration, or, if he so wished, he could remain in Judea with the poor remnant, the dregs of the people who were allowed to settle in the conquered land. Life in Babylon would have been much easier and freer, and surrounded with all those things which men commonly agree go to make existence a pleasure and a joy. For the four thousand who were carried down to Babylon, Babylon spelled captivity; but to Jeremiah it would have meant ease, honor, comfort, renown. He could forget the painful episode of the last days of Jerusalem; the sound of these stormy years would be like the sound of the sea as it

grows fainter and fainter in the distance. But Jeremiah decides to cast in his lot with Gedaliah and the few people who are left. It was a sacked, smoking, desolate, fallen city that remained; but her very dust to him was dear. Better, he thought, to be a doorkeeper in the ruins of God's house than to dwell in the tents of Babylon. Once he had longed for the time when he could escape from his people and forget the woes of Jerusalem. Now the hour has come, but he conquers that desire and refuses to desert his post or get from under his burden.

We are actors in a much more limited sphere; but who has never felt that desire to escape, to have an utter change of life and occupation and surrounding? There are times when this lodging place of wayfaring men in the desert becomes very alluring to each one of us. Of necessity life must be lived out within certain narrow lines. If we are to accomplish anything at all in the world, we must devote our attention to that one thing. We cannot prophesy in Babylon and in Jerusalem at the same time. The work that engaged hand and mind yesterday must engage heart and hand and mind tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. The rising sun calls each one of us tomorrow to the

same task that we performed last Monday. The mere monotony of work is not infrequently the cause of fretting and rebellion. The reading of a book, the conversing with a stranger, may open to us a new and undiscovered country, and we long for a voyage to its shores. The prospect of doing the same thing over and over and over, until at length we get too old and too feeble to do anything at all, is very often depressing. The heart has a hunger for other things, and other labors and other places.

"How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains; but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

The cares and the responsibilities of life may bring the wish to escape, as when Jeremiah, weary of the cares of his prophetic office, wished for the lodging place in the desert; or when Elijah, dis-

couraged by fierce and constant opposition, said, "It is enough. Take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers"; or when Lincoln told one of his visitors during the most trying period of the war that he would gladly exchange places with the private soldier who was sleeping that night with only the snow for a pillow and only the sky for a covering; or when Sherman, after the death of his son William at Memphis, wrote to his wife, "Why was I not killed at Vicksburg? I will go on to the end, but feel the chief stay to my faltering heart is now gone." More of life brings more of care and responsibility, and the man who does the best work feels most the weight of that burden. Noble souls who pray and strive for the betterment of mankind and the coming of the Kingdom of God will have their moments of deep weariness and distress when they fear that all their efforts are in vain and that the tide of evil sweeps remorselessly on, carrying all before its hungry flood. William Cowper felt the uselessness of his strivings and wished for a land where he would hear no more of all the evils and injustices which had grieved his righteous soul. The words of Jeremiah's prayer must have been in his mind when he wrote these lines in the "Task,"—

"Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness,
Some boundless contiguity of shade,
Where rumour of oppression and deceit,
Of unsuccessful or successful war,
Might never reach me more! My ear is pained,
My soul is sick with every day's report
Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled."

The heart's desire for something other, something new and strange which speaks in the sigh of Jeremiah, finds an antiphonal response in the cry of David when his heart was broken by the treachery of Absalom, that matchless lyric to which men of all ages and all faiths have set their prayer for rest and peace:—

"Oh that I had wings like a dove!
Then would I fly away and be at rest.
Lo, then would I wander far off,
I would lodge in the wilderness.
I would haste me to a shelter
From the stormy wind and tempest."

Hands that are toiling for others are groping through the night for that which hand hath not touched; minds that are perplexed for others are turning wistfully towards that peace and ease of mind which Jeremiah called the lodging place in the wilderness; backs that are bent for others are restive beneath the burden, and every pilgrim can

wish for the day when the burden shall be loosed. It cannot be far from the truth to say that every man turns his eyes towards this quiet lodging place in the wilderness. We may never have given expression to the desire, but with all of us, there is an open or unconfessed thirst for a change, something new and strange. Do you really expect to be doing just the same thing that you are doing now, to have just the same circle of acquaintances, to be carrying the same cares and responsibilities, to be bound to the same burden? How the change is to come and who is to liberate us, that we cannot tell, but the heart hunger is there; and with some of us it breaks forth into rebellion and discontent. To indulge this fancy, to pamper this desire means unhappiness and sorrow; to conquer it as Jeremiah conquered it, is to make life a sacrament.

How are we to escape from ourselves, from our weaknesses, our diseases, our sins, our sorrows, our responsibilities? Not by fleeing to a lodging place in the wilderness, but by forgetting ourselves in our service, by losing ourselves in our work. The best way to escape from the things that weary us and grieve us and annoy us is to escape from ourselves. The man who stood on the bridge at midnight and wished that the ebbing tide would bear

him away on its bosom because the burden laid upon him seemed greater than he could bear, found relief, not through forsaking life, but by forgetting himself and thinking upon the sorrows of others:

> "But now it has fallen from me,
> It is buried in the sea;
> And only the sorrow of others
> Throws its shadow over me."

Jeremiah thought that he would be happier and more contented in the wilderness, but when the time came that he could go where he pleased, he found that in all the world there was just one place for Jeremiah, and that was the place from which he had longed to escape. This enchanted place in the wilderness, the quiet inn for wayfaring men, has an existence only in our imagination. We have never been there and we contrast what we know with what we do not know, and decide in favor of the latter. The time came when this poor remnant of Israel with whom Jeremiah cast in his lot, wanted to flee into Egypt. They had never been there; it contrasted favorably with their present place, and with their possible home in Babylon. "No, but we will go into the land of Egypt, where we shall see no war; nor hear the sound of the trumpet, nor have hunger of bread; and there will

we dwell." After years of siege and famine, with the trumpet alarm ever in their ears, the prospect of peace and plenty in Egypt was most alluring. They went down into Egypt and dragged with them the unwilling Jeremiah; and in Egypt they found just what they were fleeing from—famine, war, death.

In George Eliot's great story of Romola, there is a chapter entitled, "An Arresting Voice" which tells how Romola fleeing from the difficulties and trials and sorrows of her life in Florence was met by Savonarola, who commanded her to go back, saying—

"It is the truth that commands you, and you cannot escape it. Either you must obey it and it will lead you, or you must disobey it and it will hang on you with the weight of a chain which you will drag forever. You are seeking some other good than the law you are bound to obey. But how will you find good? It is not a thing of choice; it is a river that flows from the foot of the Invisible Throne, and flows by the path of obedience. I say again, man cannot choose his duties. You may choose to forsake your duties and choose not to have the sorrow they bring. But you will go forth; and what will you find, my daughter?

Sorrow, without duty—bitter herbs, and no bread with them." When he saw under her robes the crucifix, Savonarola said, "Conform your life to that image, my daughter; make your sorrow an offering. What! the earth is full of iniquity, full of groans; the light is still struggling with a mighty darkness, and you say, 'I cannot bear my bonds; I will burst them asunder; I will go where no man claims me?' My child, every bond of life is a debt; the right lies in the payment of that debt; it can lie nowhere else. In vain you will wander over the earth; you will be wandering forever away from the right."

As we face the duties of the day and return to our old obligations, Christianity holds up before us the Cross, the image of a Supreme Offering made by a Supreme Love, because man's need is great. Are we willing to conform our lives unto that image and make all our labors and sorrows an offering to God in behalf of man? Shall we permit the light that streams from the Cross to transfigure all our duties and gild all our sorrows? When we do that a deep peace steals upon the soul. We have rest in Him who said, "Come unto me and I will give you rest. Take my joy upon you and learn of Me, and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

XII

THE PRAYER OF MANASSEH

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THE PRAYER OF MANASSEH

"And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers,

"And prayed unto him: and he was entreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God."—II CHRONICLES 33:12–13

This king came to the throne of Judah when he was but twelve years of age, and he reigned for fifty-five years. If we may judge from the records of that reign preserved for us in the Old Testament, he reigned fifty-five years too long. Never had such a man ruled over Judah and never again was his like to occupy the throne of David. His name became a synonym for all unrighteousness and the Babylonian captivity and all its woes were, in popular thought, laid at the door of Manasseh: "I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem." And what

was it he did in Jerusalem? The catalogue of his crimes is preserved for us in Kings and Chronicles. He introduced the unclean rites of the heathen religions into Judah, and made a grove for the worship of the host of heaven and reared altars unto Baal, and even carried his idolatry to the extreme of setting up an image in the temple itself. Wizards and familiar spirits flourished in the land. His own son he made to pass through the fire, that is, he offered him a sacrifice to the heathen gods. To idolatry and licentiousness was added the inevitable companion, cruelty. The age of Manasseh was an age of persecution and bloodshed. "Moreover Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another." The aged prophet Isaiah is supposed to have been one of the victims of his ferocious persecutions. It was a day when the true worshipers of the Lord "had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment; they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goat skins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented, of whom the world was not worthy."

Warnings were sent to him through the proph-

ets, but he persecuted them and scorned their God. At length his cup of iniquity was full. The Assyrian invaders took him among the thorns, bound him with fetters and carried him to Babylon. There in his affliction "he besought the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto Him; and He was entreated of him and heard his supplication and brought him again into Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God."

The apocryphal book of Manasses gives what is supposed to have been his prayer when in Babylon. Unlike much that is in the apocryphal books, this prayer is worthy of David or Hezekiah. They are the words that might well have been upon the lips of that guilty and conscience-stricken monarch when his afflictions came upon him in Babylon: "O Lord, Almighty God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and of their righteous seed; who hast made heaven and earth, with all the ornament thereof; who hast bound the sea by the word of thy commandment; who hast shut up the deep and sealed it by thy terrible and glorious name; whom all men fear, and tremble before thy power; for the majesty of thy glory cannot be borne,

and thine angry threatening toward sinners is importable, but thy merciful promise is unmeasurable and unsearchable; for thou art the most high Lord, of great compassion, long-suffering, very merciful, and repentest of the evils of men. Thou, O Lord, according to thy great goodness, hast promised repentance and forgiveness to them that have sinned against thee; and of thine infinite mercies hast appointed repentance unto sinners, that they may be saved, Thou, therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the just, hast not appointed repentance to the just, as to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, which have not sinned against thee; but thou hast appointed repentance unto me that am a sinner: for I have sinned above the number of the sands of the sea. My transgressions, O Lord, are multiplied; my transgressions are multiplied, and I am not worthy to behold and see the height of heaven for the multitude of mine iniquities. I am bowed down with many iron bands, that I cannot lift up mine head, neither have any release; for I have provoked thy wrath, and done evil before thee: I did not thy will, neither kept I thy commandments: I have set up abominations, and have multiplied offences. Now, therefore, I bow the knee of mine heart, beseeching

thee of grace. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned, and I acknowledge mine iniquities: wherefore I humbly beseech thee, forgive me, O Lord, forgive me, and destroy me not with mine iniquities. Be not angry with me forever, by reserving evil for me; neither condemn me into the lower parts of the earth, for thou art the God, even the God of them that repent; and in me thou wilt show all thy goodness: for thou wilt save me, that am unworthy, according to thy great mercy. Therefore I will praise thee forever all the days of my life: for all the powers of the heavens do praise thee, and thine is the glory forever and ever. Amen."

Manasseh is another exception to the rule that good men have good sons. His father was Hezekiah, one of the best of the kings of Judah. It was said of him that he made Israel worse than the heathen nations themselves. It was certainly true of himself that he was worse than a heathen. If a son who has been brought up in a Christian home and surrounded with Christian influences scorns those influences and precepts, and leads a bad life, it is almost invariably the case that he becomes worse than the worst of those who have not had the early environment that he had. There is a reckless defiance in his deeds, an abandon in his

sin, a perverseness in his will that puts him in a class by himself. The very goads of conscience only serve to drive him further into his iniquity.

All that Manasseh's godly father had done, he had undone. In a southern city one summer, a negro hackman, driving me through the city, pointed out the buildings of a well known college, and in front of the main building the statue of the man who gave the money for the founding of the college. In another part of the town, he showed me a secluded house where the reprobate son of that father lived with a woman for his wife whom no decent person would recognize. The negro appreciated the difference between the father and the son. The one made his name honorable in the city and in the state; the other made the same name to stink in the eyes of the community, to every good work a reprobate. So was Manasseh towards his good and great father, Hezekiah.

The worse sinner Manasseh was, the more music there is in his song of repentance and restoration. He was to be a monument to the power of evil to destroy before he became a monument to the power of grace and repentance to forgive and restore. Manasseh is the prodigal of the Old

Testament. In want, pain, anguish, he came to himself and repented.

It was the repentance of an old man, so far as we can judge from the history. That, in itself, makes it a rare conversion. Very few old men turn to God in their old age, after a youth and a middle life of godlessness and sin. As the arteries harden and the hair whitens, habits of the heart become fixed. The fires of enthusiasm which might have been devoted to goodness and righteousness sink and die. The command, the appeal, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth," receives tragic and solemn ratification from the extreme infrequency with which an old man repents and is converted. But this king, old in years, older in iniquity, did repent and was converted and did receive pardon. There are no age limits to the insurance terms of saving faith. God can turn to Him the lad of tender years, like Samuel in the house of the high priest at Shiloh, before that heart was stained with an evil thought or hardened with a single resistance to the will of God, and He can revive the heart of the hardened sinner of four score years.

I have heard men speak slightingly of the repentance of the thief on the Cross, of deathbed

conversions, as if they really begrudged the stricken soul the privilege of turning, even at the very last, to God. But God's ways are not our ways. All things are possible with Him. One of those things, repeated over and over again in the history of grace, is the repentance and the reformation of one who has long been given over to all manner of evil, yes, of one who has sinned away days of opportunity and gifts of birth and instruction. There are no "hopeless" cases with God. Behold this reprobate and apostate, this persecutor and idolater, entreating the God of his father until he was heard and forgiven, and restored to his throne, and then improving the few years left him in life by doing what he could to undo the past.

The records of wars sometimes tell of officers who lost their rank and were dropped from the rolls of the regiment in disgrace, but afterwards by heroic conduct won back their lost rank. There is always in the soul that possibility of reclaiming and regaining the honors and the righteousness it has lost. No matter how deep into the far country the son has wandered, there is always a path that leads back to the Father's house. There is a robe kept in readiness for you, O wandering son! There is a ring that will never be put on any

finger but yours, O wandering daughter! There is a welcome for you, O hardened sinner! Christ receiveth sinners! He likes to go out and meet them on the way back. He delights in remaking them and redeeming them. Let cynics smile; let believers argue; this is the glory of Christianity that it is able to save unto the uttermost all that come unto God by Jesus Christ. "Though ye have lain among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold."

XIII

A PRAYER EVERY MAN MAKES

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A PRAYER EVERY MAN MAKES

"Oh that I had wings like a dove! Then would I fly away and be at rest."—PSALM 55:6

Not in lofty language like this, for not every man is a poet and a singer of the deep music of the heart, but in the heart's desire, all men make this prayer. You have sat in the public hall listening to the performance of a company of skilled musicians as they render the works of some of the masters of music. With sudden and abrupt beginning, or with low harmony, the musicians have taken up their theme, and the great audience follows them patiently through all their crescendos and dimuendos, their sudden and fearful crashes, with blaring trumpets and rumbling drums and noisy cymbals, and their whispered cadences, almost too faint for the keenest ear to catch. Then the manner changes and we follow the composer into some delightful by path of sweetest melody; it may be an aria that all have known and hummed to themselves, or one that invokes the memories of the long, long ago and brings back faces

long since faded from our view and voices that for long years have been still. Amazement, perplexity, patience, or pretended or professional attention gives place now to rapt expectation; a holy hush falls all over the house, and breasts heave deeply but quietly, and every ear and every eye is attentive as the thousands who hear feel within them the vibrations of immortal song.

What had happened? What had wrought the change? The orchestra had touched one of those melodies which awaken immediate response in the universal heart. That is what David did in this Psalm. He struck a universal note. That is the privilege of genius; that is the power of inspiration. The greatest literature is not that which produces the strangest effects or startles the intellect or the imagination, but that which touches the heart and gives noble and seemingly almost perfect expression to that which you yourself have felt speaking within you. Why are Milton and Shakespeare and Burns great poets? Because they suggest to you what you had never thought of before? Because they make strange combinations of word and thought? Not so. But because they say about man, about God, about death, about sin, about sorrow, about pain, about the sea, about the

sky, about the hillside flower, what you yourself have been feeling and thinking. They make you speak.

When David cries, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! Then would I fly away and be at rest!" he is but saying what all of you say in your own hearts. When he speaks thus, you listen intently because you hear the echo of your own voice. The prayer for rest is a common prayer and therefore a great one. In a sermon on this text, Farrar quotes the great French preacher Bossuet as saying that "an inexorable weariness lies at the foundations of our life." Jesus knew what was in man when He said, "Come unto me, and I will give you rest." What do we mean by rest? Not cessation from labor and activity, though there may be some so tired and driven of their daily work that they wish they might leave their labor today and never be called back to it again. Their lot has been so hard and heavy that the Bible promises of rest sound sweetly in their ears. I never see a pale, worn washer-woman without thinking that her chief prayer must be for rest, the coming of the day when her hard task will no longer confront her. There are multitudes for whom life is one long, never-ceasing grind of manual labor, and a labor

which is often beyond their strength. They would not be human did not this prayer, this sigh, break unbidden from their lips, "Oh that I had wings like a dove. Then would I fly away and be at rest!" The fact that the prayer is not answered and that "Rest elsewhere" must be the motto of mortal life, does not prevent man from making it. There are some who are so weary that even the grave seems to them a place to be desired, a place where the weary are at rest. In his map of life, Lecky tells of seeing this touching epitaph in a German churchyard: "I will arise, O Christ, when Thou callest me; but oh! let me rest awhile, for I am very weary." Yes, for some it will need to be a long, long rest.

"We shall rest, and faith we shall need it.
Lie down for an æon or two,
Till the Master of all good workmen
Shall set us to work anew."

Like the murmur of a distant and long-time abandoned river of peace is this tradition of unrest and discontent which lingers in the heart of mankind. It must be either the recollection of something man once had and lost, or something that man once shall have; perhaps both. Different causes produce the same cry of the soul. In the

case of the Psalmist, it seems to have been the treachery and ingratitude of a warm, personal friend. If it had been an enemy, he could have borne it, or one that hated him, he would merely have avoided him. But it was neither: it was his intimate friend that had struck the wicked, cowardly blow. "It was thou, a man mine equal, my companion and my familiar friend. We took sweet counsel together and went in company to the house of God." Nothing rocks the boat of life as does that wave of ingratitude or treachery. With it there comes a terrible feeling of desolation upon the soul, a barren waste and desolation, a wilderness, which leaves no place for faith in man and hardly a place for faith in God. The tradition which represents Cæsar as offering no resistance and caring no longer to live when he found his friend among those who stabbed him, however true in that historic instance, is true of mankind in general. The kiss of Judas is not far from Calvary. The wounded soul would spread its wings and fly away and be at rest. It would wander where man had never gone before and in some vast solitude would build its lodging place. Life is precious to all, but life can be made unspeakably bitter and painful, and finding it so, at such a moment, the

wounded soul makes its prayer for release and rest.

But not only the personal experience with man's baseness awakens within the breast this prayer for rest, but man's contemplation of the sin and hardness of mankind. Righteous souls, they who wait for the coming of the Kingdom of God, are grieved within themselves when they view the long procession of crimes and follies, of wars and battles and outrages, persecutions and proscriptions and inquisitions. How dark has been the history of mankind, and dark its sky today! The more the heart is attuned to the will of God, and the greater the desire for the coming of the kingdom of purity and love, the greater will be one's capacity to feel the weariness of this long battle and wish for deliverance from it. It was this, the sense of the perversity of Israel, their infatuation for idols, their enmity towards their God, that for a moment discouraged Jeremiah and made him cry out in words so much like those of this Psalm that he has been mentioned as a possible author for the Psalm: "Oh, that I had in the wilderness a lodging-place for wayfaring men, that I might leave my people and go from them! For they are all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men!"

And this which made Elijah cry out for death when he fled from before Jezebel, "It is enough, O Lord! Take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers!" His bold spirit quailed for a moment before the organized wickedness of the age and of the realm. Let any man take an active part in the ranks of that small and select host who really pray and strive for the uplift of mankind, who battle against poverty, intemperance, war, or who preach to the world that has been poisoned and hardened by sin, the lofty and beautiful doctrines of the Christian religion, and he will come to the time and the place, not once or twice, when he could wish to be delivered from it all, when he realizes that he wrestles not against flesh and blood only, but against angels, principalities, powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world, and when, his spirit overcome by the fierce resistance of evil, and his heart saddened by the evidence of how little influence his words and his efforts are having upon those whom he desires to influence the most, he repeats the cry of David of old, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! Then would I fly away and be at rest. Lo, then would I wander far off, I would lodge in the wilderness. I would haste me to a shelter from the stormy wind and tempest!"

Another thing in life which evokes this cry is personal sorrow and affliction. The blow has fallen and the sunlight of life has been extinguished. Life that a little moment ago was so dear, so rich, so full of interest, so full of promise, has suddenly become a thing to be dreaded, and to escape from, if that were possible. Bravely the faltering steps may tread the familiar path, and bravely the old tasks may be resumed and the old duties performed. Through showers of tears we grope our uncertain way, but as we go, we feel that the "tender grace of a day that is gone will never come back to me." Then does the heart wish that it might mount up with wings as eagles, as doves, and fly away; be transported to another stage and realm of life, for although duty remains, pleasures and joys of a kind too, yet life, life here in this world can never again be to you what it once was, or what it had been up to that moment when the change came and the song died away into a plaintive sigh.

Then there is the unrest of sin. Men have bitter memories of the past; their conscience wakes when of all times they could wish that it had slept. An invisible but not-to-be-severed chain, with a strange ability to multiply its length according to

the years and the distance of man's wanderings, in the very article of transgression, is forged by the fires and anvil of justice and retribution, one end of that chain fastened to the transgression, the other fastened to the transgressor, and they twain shall never be separated. The doer of the evil thing may think that he is free; he may not have heard the clanking of his chain of bondage for many a year; but when he least expects it, he finds that he is a prisoner, bound forever to the transgression of yesterday. It is in such a time, dazed and frightened by the manifestation of this solemn law, and realizing his inability to separate himself by an act of his own, from the past sin and its consequences, that the heart of man wishes for a new man, a different self to rise within him,

> "Oh for a man to rise in me,
> That the man I am might cease to be."

and that is but an echo of the cry of the ancient psalmist, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! Then would I fly away and be at rest!"

Or here is another man, not so much in bitterness because he finds that although he has mended his ways, the retribution of old ways that were wrong cannot be held back, but because he can-

not mend his ways. He is in the bondage of evil; he tries to rise from the ground where it has cast him, but before he gains his feet, his dark master has smitten him again to the earth. With each new failure, there comes a more poignant sense of shame and humiliation; the darkness, the pity of it, the misery of it comes upon the soul like an engulfing flood, and the slave to the evil habit, unable to overcome, no longer able even to resist, can but wish, though hopelessly, that some power outside of himself would release him and save him. Man has no wings with which to mount up and fly away from the temptations which gather round him, hungry for the spoil of a soul, and it is at that awful moment when man beholds evil coming down upon him to slay him, and it at the same time feels his own impotence to resist it, that the despairing soul cries out, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! Then would I fly away and be at rest!" Oh, that I were something different than I am! If I am to lead a beast's life, then let it be with the nature and instinct of the beast, and not a beastly existence with the thoughts and hopes and fears of a man!

We have looked at the burdens and trials and temptations and losses of man as he goes through

life, and have seen how they give rise to this plaintive sigh for rest and peace, but it will be no different if we look at man successful, honorable, useful, getting a liberal share of the good things of life. Life itself, however bright and long, cannot satisfy him. He desires to possess, but possession kills the joy. He climbs one peak only to find that there is another to lure him further and higher. Before he has found what he has been so eagerly seeking, the dark curtain of death, disregarding the progress that man has made, how little or how much he has gained, whether in good or in evil, falls upon the world with its bright scenes, and the agitations of his anxious heart are stilled forever. With a perpetual tendency to look for enjoyment, man never discovers it. It is always tomorrow, always on the other side of the hill; always beyond today's horizon, and when tomorrow has come, beyond tomorrow's. "At Rest" his friends carve upon his grave at the end of the journey, as if to confess that here man is only a pilgrim and a stranger, and that this world was not designed nor intended for rest.

> "Man's grief is but his grandeur in disguise;
> And discontent is immortality."

Life then composes and pronounces the sen-

tences of this prayer for rest, repose, satisfaction, peace. Is it a prayer that can be answered? If man is to answer it, No. If God, Yes. It is when we get to see the futility and inadequacy of man's wisdom and man's help, the inability of man to answer his own prayers, to create the happiness for which he so earnestly longs, that we come to understand the meaning of Christianity and the inestimable offers of Jesus Christ. He watches this long procession of restless, discontented, world-weary spirits, desiring they hardly know what: the man who has met with nothing but adversity and failure; and walking by his side the man at whose touch all turned to gold and who won all the honors of earth that he set his heart upon, both of them unsatisfied; and here the man who made his bitter and shameful mistake, and the man who had kept himself unspotted from the world, both of them seeking for what they have not; and here he who walks alone, no loving faces and loving hearts about him; and he who walked always in the midst of family, and children and the company of friends, both of them with a prayer and a sigh upon their lips. And what does Christ say? "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." I will give

you what you are looking for. I will grant you what you are praying for. "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me and ye shall find rest unto your souls." "Come," is what he says to us. It is not enough to hear about Him; we must come to Him. "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have eternal life," He said of men in His day upon earth. The conditions have never changed. We must come, we must take His yoke upon us; we must keep His commandments; and when we do that, perhaps He will surprise us with His wonderful power to satisfy all our needs and answer all our prayers. We know that the world cannot give us the rest and the peace which we seek; too many generations bear testimony for us to doubt it. He alone can do it; and if not He, to whom shall we go? It is only a thread that binds us to this world; we can sever it if we will and follow Christ. But will we do it?

"Finding, following, keeping, struggling,
Is He sure to bless?
Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs,
Answer, 'Yes.'"

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